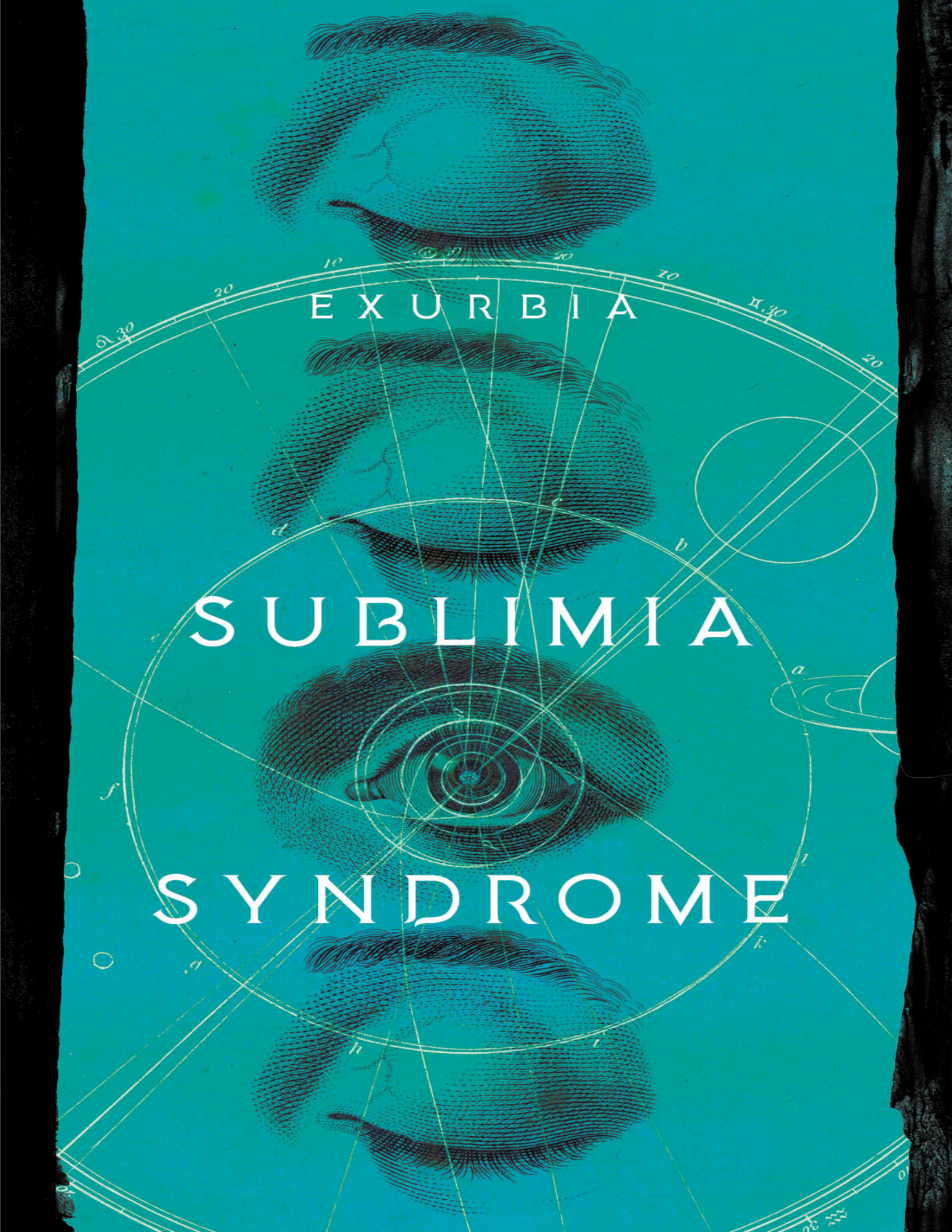
EXURBIA
SUBLIMIA
SYNDROME

Sublimia Syndrome

exurb1a

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For Soy Sauce

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The First Technology Was Language

There, it's done. The baby is well and the mother rejoices. It was not the easiest birth I have attended, nor the hardest either.

The mother's name is Duma. She is a middling-size world, more land than ocean. Her harvests are many, her disasters are few. An unremarkable planet populated by a species of human you would recognise as human.

But their world-language, Duman – it is known as the most specific in all the galaxy.

Sotieti: the electric field that hangs over your morning when someone you like will be visiting later.

Fasimit: the fear that one's joyful days are all behind now.

And *svobodnoto*: the freedom that comes with learning to let go; of people, of oneself, of the future.

It is my turn to let go.

I have been on this world five standard years. Even now the day-night cycle feels unnaturally long. I am used to twenty-two-hour spins, not thirty-five, and usually wake at dawn. So have I woken this morning, my last morning, the constellations still up, Imdriso, the planetary capital still quiet, its taxis sleeping on the roadside, its drunks stumbling home.

I pack my few possessions into a rucksack – my radio, my journal, my ideolabe, and set out into the morning towards Nistri Mountain.

Why do we only see things truly upon seeing them for the last time? I have walked these streets for half a decade, usually so trapped in worry that I barely paused to watch my step – but look now, now my work is done; cats are frolicking in rubbish bins, morning dew is generating on the leaves; civilisation is in progress, recursively remaking itself like a hand reaching around to draw its own wrist. It is Duma's first real morning of history. I so wish they knew.

I have spent five years preparing this thing, their salvation. If all goes well – and it generally does in my experience – ten minutes from now an airship will depart from the Scholar's Guild and make the ten-minute flight to the House of Parliament. A short conversation will ensue between clever

and powerful people, and Duma will agree then and forevermore that the future is more important than the past, and abandon their space programme. I know this will happen. I made it so with words and numbers.

At this moment my behethan, my vehicle, my pet, is waking from her five-year slumber in orbit around Mesets, Duma's second moon, and readying to come collect me on the peak of Nistri Mountain. As I climb to the peak, I gain more vantage on those things I will miss below: the flower gardens, the temples, the markets, the schools – these society-things that, if I may say so, thanks to me, are now free to flourish.

I suppose it is sad in some sense that Duma will never be a star-faring world, will never join the Symposium of Humankind because of my actions here. But think of what is gained for that. They will remain forever safe on the edge of human space, forever protected in obscurity; a hermit pottering about his garden, perfectly content for not knowing of the horrors beyond his gate.

Up into the middle passes of the mountain now – those flowers and scents native to most worlds given planetary intermingling and colonisation thousands of years ago: dogwood, linden, jasmine and oh, truth. Let it be truth that lingers as the final perfume of this world. For in my own small way I have come to spread truth here, and while the Dumans won't remember me, though no one here shall ever know my name, their world is a child I have delivered, or a tree-trapped cat I have saved from a fatal fall, or a flower, mottled and near death that I, in my brilliant and ingenious way, have—

But the airship isn't moving. I see it there, still sleeping at the Scholar's Guild, no sign of departing for the House of Parliament. I wait a little longer. Nothing.

Why.

Why?

Why—

*

—was that the day my life changed? So it happened upon graduation that us generalists, twenty and twenty-one years old, were allowed to specialise and choose our majisters to study under. And this was how I found myself in the Theoretics Tower of the Sociographer's College, one hundred floors

up. I had visited several majisters already (it was a student's privilege to choose their teacher, not the other way around) and was on my way to meet another when I passed through a courtyard of rosebushes.

I came upon two caretakers, a young man and woman, hurling insults at each other. The dialect was impossible to understand, but clearly all was not well. I thought of intervening, then remembered I was nobody here.

I hurried on through the cloisters and hallways in search of a destiny. Turning a corner, I spied a woman throwing what looked to be fruit off a balcony and into the courtyard below.

"May I ask what you're doing?" I said.

"Day drinking," the woman replied. Students and majisters were staring up at her display, perplexed.

"I'm sorry?"

"Melon smash, specifically. Three parts gin, two parts orange juice." She raised her finger to me as though it were a jewel to be regarded or a bomb to be defused, added, "And one part melon."

"Why are you *dropping* the melons?"

"The recipe specifies they must be opened by gravity, and I'm a stickler for details, but then I wrote the recipe after all."

"Right," I said and made to leave.

"You're going the wrong way," she said, nodding to a chamber where, behind a half-closed door, I spied a sandpit filled with scribbled glyphs.

"I have no interest in word games," I said as politely as I could.

"But what if they're interested in you?" She threw another melon to its inertial death below. I went to bid the mad woman goodbye once more. She said, "A year's tuition to find out if we like each other."

"What?"

"I'll give you a year. If you're insolent or lazy, I'll be rid of you."

I laughed unkindly. "You expect me to believe you're a *majister*?"

With a shrug she rolled up her sleeve to show the customary blue robe beneath, saying, "I hardly believe it myself some days."

She gestured ahead to the panorama, the spires and castellations of the College. "That tower to the left, those are the pragmatists. They will teach you to control worlds by manipulating economies, boom, bust, profit-lust and the like. To the right, bastards – the world-mythicists, narrativists – bastards, who subvert whole civilisations by tinkering with ideologies. Go find a majister there if such approaches appeal. Those roads will lead you

one day to titles and accolades, to affluent postings on bountiful worlds. You need never get your hands dirty and I promise you'll live millennia, or centuries at least."

How mythic that sounded, like the stories of the wider galaxy I'd grown up with, all valour and science and flight. "And if I take you as my majister instead?" I asked, a cynical curiosity blossoming in me.

"Then you'll have truth," she murmured. "And more wine than you can shake a kidney at."

"But what is your field, madam?"

"Linguistic levers," she said. "The smallest application of force for the largest possible social effect. Rhetoric that flips the world on its butt and back over again. Sociopoetics."

I resisted a snort. "And what can one do with such a *science*?"

"What should you like to do with it, sceptical little gosling?"

I glanced about. In the courtyard below, still among the rosebushes, were the same bickering caretakers as before.

"Solve that," I said.

She only shrugged and returned to launching fruit off the balcony.

I spent the day in dusty halls learning of distant worlds and their troubles, of the great Symposium of Humankind and its civilising reach across the stars. I met with pragmatists and narrativists, all promising that their methods were the most powerful in maintaining galactic unity. I pretended my hardest at being an adult, kept my robe uncreased and waited for my turn to speak, until I pretended so hard that it simply became my nature, which I suppose is how adulthood happens anyway.

In the end I settled on enrolling with the pragmatists, arranged to study under a pleasant enough majister there, and saw myself growing comfortably old and sagely in those ornate chambers, well-rested and well-fed.

It was evening when I passed back through the rosebush courtyard bound for the student dormitories. Two figures were engaged in a passionate kiss beneath an orb light. I tried to ignore their garish display until I noticed their shawls. It was the screaming caretakers from the morning.

I raced up the stairwell again to the mad woman's chamber. She was standing above the sandpit now, a stick in her hand, a scribble of glyphs

before her.

“The shouting couple, how did you fix that?” I asked.

She tapped the symbols in the sandpit with her stick, murmured, “Acrimony operators, diplomacy quaternions, you could learn to do the same.”

“I am not interested in your mathematical poetry, or whatever it is.”

“But it seems to have taken an interest in you, Erdo,” she replied, somehow knowing my name.

“Tell me how you reunited them, please.”

She pouted with false modesty. “Minds are doors and words the keys, and the relative size of both makes no difference when they are correctly suited. The solution to your problem was easy. Unfulfilled childhood, an innate ever-longing for wider vistas, a tendency towards melancholy…”

“The caretakers’ quarrel?” I said.

“Introversion,” she continued, fixing me with a sardonic stare. “Overconfidence in one’s own intellect. Comically floppy hair—”

“Me?” I asked, and pointed to the glyphs in the sand as though a child seeing its name written for the first time.

She shrugged. “The right keys, the right locks. Besides, wouldn’t you rather study under me than those other unoriginal, teetotal, bearded farts? I set no homework, prohibit no hangovers.”

“I refuse,” I said, surprised at the strength of my own indignation. “I’m no mouse in a maze. This is a parlour trick at best. People are not equations.” By which I meant of course: I am not an equation.

“All right,” she said. “In which case I’ll see you again in…” She scratched about in the sand, symbols I could not begin to guess the meaning of. “Oh, a week?”

Out the window a behethan rose into the air preparing for the long climb to space. Towers burned orange with lit candles within; majisters huddled over histories and formulae, charting the social destinies of millennia to come, of the fraught plight of the stars above, and the trillion humans they wore about them like grandiloquent rings upon old and reaching fingers. The hallways pattered with the footsteps of newly enrolled students making their way to bed, their destinies already settled. I sensed mine was close to becoming settled also.

“Do I have a choice in refusing?” I said.

“As much as any other character in any other story.”

“None then?”

“None then,” she agreed.

She nodded to the stick at my feet, my end of the sandpit blank, waiting for my first move in a game we would play together for decades. I took up the stick and said, “You promised there was wine.”

She poured us both a glass and ten more after. And that was how I became a student of the mad and luminous Majister Gwendolyn for the next half-century and—

*

—an hour and the airship still has not flown. Something is wildly off.

I take out my ideolabe, and at the wave of my hand its spokes whirl and blaze in gold, blue, and red, its mechanical brain coming to life. I input my gambit exactly as I calculated it, ideograph by ideograph. If the equation were words it would sound something like: *How can Duma be convinced to abandon its spacefaring fantasies?*

The ideolabe spins and whirs again, a mathematical whirligig, its coefficients balancing until the answer presents before me as it has every time I’ve run this question, the ideographs reading: *Duma must fear progress.*

I have done everything to provoke that, trying to bend these people towards planetism and isolationism – to hells with the galaxy, *We best, we best, we best…*

That airship from the Scholar’s Guild was to be the closing move of my final gambit, the culmination of five years’ work. Scientists and sages would meet with powerful ministers of the Duman Parliament, and advise them to dismantle all launchpads, rockets, and apparatus of their space programme. They would advocate, quite sensibly, for staying home and tending to one’s lot. But despite my preparations this has not occurred; the airship sits sleeping in its hangar. I know my sociopoetics were perfect – I left subliminal hints in their advertising, in their literature, throughout their culture, all of it designed to reach fruition today.

And yet…

I should pay Avarian, the chief scientist of the Scholar’s Guild, a cordial visit. Disasters are usually the scientists’ fault.

The sun is up now as I descend the mountain, Imdriso coming alive, its markets opening, its bureaus bureaucratising. Normally these regularities fill me with a sense of a guaranteed future, but this morning they are nothing but an omen of ruin. If I'm stupid enough to return to the College after this screw-up, I will be stripped of my robes and title and spend the rest of my days licking envelopes in a cellar.

I radio Bisi, my behethan, exiting lunar orbit as she must be doing now and try to explain I have changed my mind and must remain on Duma a little longer. Only static and a distant murmur comes in recognition. Has she understood or is she simply waking up? I'll have to burn that bridge when I get to it.

Through the great bazaar, the reading alleys, the baths and invention halls, and finally to the Scholar's Guild. It is ten o'clock. I should've been in orbit an hour ago, settling into Bisi's soup of tonics and amino acids, ready to sleep my way home to the College, forty light years distant, my masterpiece completed. Instead I am flushed with panic, wondering if this is the end of the story as intended or only the beginning of something infinitely more horrible: the overture to a catastrophe.

I wait on a bench opposite the Scholar's Guild an hour, two, then Avarian, the chief scientist, emerges. I follow as distantly as I can. He eats soup at a street stall, his posture betraying no worry – how nice for him – then he walks deeper into the city. I'd like to grab him by the collar and scream holy murder: *You've ruined everything, you stupid bastard.*… Deeper still, the shanty quarter – what is he doing here? He turns into an antiques shop. Ten minutes later he emerges with a small item wrapped in brown paper and sets off down an alley.

Instead of following, I step into the shop, curious.

Relics lie in dusty light, exuding time. An ageing man sits at the desk and nods politely to me.

"What do you sell?" I ask him.

Puzzled, he replies, "Antiques…"

"And what did you sell to the person who just came in?"

"Antiques," he says again, perhaps wondering if I'm an idiot.

For five years my interventions have been as subtle as possible, but now my gambit seems to be faltering and a bolder approach is required. I say gently, "The avarice of gilded blood, the sanctity of salt, how now brave cormorant? All dressed in time's best…"

His eyes droop, his countenance relaxes. I catch him before his head hits the desk. I say, “What do you sell?”

“Contraband sometimes,” he murmurs.

“Sourced from where?”

“Khasala.” A large city west of Imdriso.

“Show me.”

He gestures to a locked cupboard. He’s reluctant at first, but I give him another burst: “The fevered whims of suns extinct, the drunken cat’s intent,” – and he admits the combination to the lock.

Inside are objects unlike any I’ve seen on Duma before: helices of transparent metal, orbs of coloured glass that shimmer with light from heavenly planes. I would like to vomit and lie down and vomit again, because I fear I know what these things are.

I pick up what might be a bowl designed for a monster’s dinner table and peer in. A face greets me as a reflection, my own. It blinks when I do not blink, opens its eyes horrified. Suddenly I see the room whirl in the reflection, then only black.

Next it is my turn to blink in disbelief, grow horrified, and launch the thing at the wall, just as the image predicted.

This reflection peered into the future somehow. No part of me wishes to know by what means.

What other aberrations are waiting here?

“Are you part of a larger operation?” I ask the man.

He’s quiet a moment, perhaps inwardly trying to resist the terrible pressures I’ve put upon him. Or perhaps he is—

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—lying there, Majister Gwendolyn and I on the roof of the Theoretics Tower drinking melon smash, neither of us capable of standing. A behethan had just given birth and, as was tradition, every other behethan from across the star system had come to meet the child; hundreds of them swirling languorously above us like a galaxy of whales turning on its blissful axis.

She said, “The College calls us idiots in public, but tolerates our sociopoetic art in secret. Why do you think this is, silly gosling?”

“Because we rarely shower?” I offered.

“No, because as much as they pretend we’re useless, they’re scared it actually works. And they long for the day when it is a complete science, and those prim-faced men and women of the Symposium will use it to close down every artery of the human heart so nothing gets through, not a millilitre of love, all of it vetted and controlled, regulated and standardised by the great differential coefficient of the soul. And history will end then, because it will become impossible for anything new to ever happen again.”

I said, “Madam, won’t we be safe at last when we have a full sociopoetic model of the human? Isn’t that the point?”

“Oh, we’ll be safe,” she murmured, gesturing out to the sky and the stars, to the thousands of human worlds before us. “And they’ll all be doting servants.”

I did not share her misgivings. Just as we’d geometrised the subatomic and solved physics millennia before, next we would perfect a final theory of the soul. Happiness, contentment, belonging, they would be soluble problems at last, engineered merely by the right words. I said, “The heart as an equation…”

“No,” she countered, raising her *This is important* finger. “Not the heart, but the *mind*. We were told that minds are made of neurons and atoms and quarks and loops. None of these are the case. Minds are made of ideas, and ideas are made of words. And in the subtle manipulation of those words, one either dominates or liberates a person or an entire culture. The first technology was language.”

“I think the first technology was fire…” I murmured.

“Because you’re an idiot.”

Usually I knew better than to argue with her when she was drunk and maudlin, but I was also drunk and maudlin. I said, “And yet if there were no brains, there would be no ideas. When the meat dies…”

“Well,” she said. “How lucky I am to be lectured by one so astute. Did you learn nothing from Dean Kureshi’s funeral?”

The dean of the Sociopoetics Faculty had died a few days before. We’d attended the death ceremony and paid our respects, an entirely boring outing.

She said, “Perhaps you noticed the large book carried ceremonially through the halls just behind his casket?”

She was right; orderlies had shouldered some dusty work in his wake. I said, “A bedtime story he enjoyed?”

She rolled over to fix me with a serious stare. She said, “When the time is correct, each sociopoetics majister is called upon to write a memoir. But it is not just a memoir, rather a receptacle for their thoughts, their temperament, their madness. A little storehouse for the mind if you like: a *literafact*. And when they inevitably shuffle off their mortal coil, there it gets deposited in their crypt, just in case we ever need to resurrect them for a question only they would know the answer to.”

“Bullshit,” I said.

She spat an ice cube in my face. “Incorrect on this occasion.”

“Their mind? Stored in what, language?”

“In *pure* language,” she corrected me. “As pure as we can get anyway.”

I snorted and let her simmer in the silence of her lie. Finally she said, “It’s called parsillogy. One day, when you know enough to know you don’t know everything, I’ll teach you to speak it – our best attempt at the base code structure of language itself.”

“You’re testing to see if I’m a gullible idiot…”

She sighed softly and murmured, “So it was in the weave of the fricative that the tempest had bulged, wept, and dirged. Now go proclaim the wind, now lick the fifth star west…”

It was as if the sky began to slowly explode, the velvet black turning to purple, then royal blue, the stars growing to the size of skulls, and the behethans below them became as the dial on a safe, swivelling to unlock, swivelling to unlock…

She sang, “He remedied the smog of the world and they gave him gravid candelabras in gratitude, adorned his ears with fire. Go dance, now lick the fifth star west…”

The whole sky opened, as though reality finally trusted me and would show its insides out. “My gods,” I whispered.

“You think language is a finger that points,” Majister Gwendolyn said, her eyes full of purple fire then. “But it’s just as well a key. And as with any key, the—

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—storehouse is on the edge of the city. I find it thanks to the compromised mind of the antiques man, even though his directions were confused and hesitant. Perhaps my parsillogy is slipping – I’m out of practice after all.

He’ll suffer a hangover but nothing serious, remember only a little of our encounter. Besides, the mind is clever. With a few hours missing from the memory, new recollections are invented to explain the gap.

A single mercenary guards the storehouse. We talk briefly: “So very fierce the snowbound fire, the lyre played upside down.” He collapses.

Could one use parsillogy on themselves, I sometimes wonder? Perhaps that’s exactly what consciousness is: the mind creating the words, the words creating the mind…

There is no preparing for what is inside. Like in the antiques shop, there are illegal relics one can only guess the function of, but this time in their hundreds, all lovingly boxed up as though gifts.

After some searching, I come upon a set of stone tablets. They are covered in something close to modern Duman script; poetry, engineering instructions, cooking recipes even.

Accompanying the tablets is a sheet of scientific notes, presumably written by whoever runs the storehouse. They claim that carbon-29 dating has confirmed these tablets – along with the other objects here – are at least one hundred thousand years old. Laughably impossible. The text is clearly Duman, a language brought by the humans who settled here. And those humans settled here, at most, five thousand years ago, just after the twenty-ninth collapse. Duman dating science has a long way to go.

Still, these are the least unsettling of the relics.

I discover a bluish disc and spin it on the floor. It falls through higher-dimensional space, appearing, disappearing, subject entirely to its own geometric logic.

Then there is a jar of salts that, once ingested, suddenly paints a star map on the inside of my mind’s eye for a minute or two.

Finally: a necklace that allows my hand to pass through solid matter.

A highly organised group is digging these abominations up and distributing them. There’s enough contraband here to destabilise not just Duma, but fifty other worlds.

If my behethan weren’t such a pacifist, I would call her into low orbit and have her raze this entire storehouse from above.

I hold the necklace in my hand and feel a terror rising in me. Strange minds made this, intellects that must never be reckoned with. The Big Sisters, gone now, and may the gods keep them so…

How did I not see this smuggling operation ahead in the sociopoetics? – almost as though it were hidden from me.

Am I knocking up against another's plans, one who seeks to subvert mine? Perhaps my gambit was perfect, only someone else is on Duma throwing off all the variables: an outside human factor, a professional confuser, a mahayir, or—

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—some weeks into my tuition, Majister Gwendolyn and I were playing a game we never named, but could just as well have been called: *It's 2 PM, Let's Pretend to Work While We Get Wicked Drunk Instead*. I was idling over a new set of ideographs she had given me. She'd taught me many by then; the ten symbols of renaissance, the operators of revolution. After all, ideographs were the lifeblood of sociopoetics; the symbols by which one could assemble formulae not just to model human behaviour, but bend it.

"And what is *this* one?" I asked, tapping a symbol that looked like a little eye. "It turns up in every formulation of yours, but isn't defined."

She reluctantly drew herself back from a daydream at the window. "Chaos," she said. "The muddling of things."

"The mahayirs?" I said, referring to the bogeymen of the college – the myth of those rogue spies who stymied our plans, the saboteurs of our gambits.

"No," she said. "Just chaos."

I could not accept that. It flew in the face of everything she'd told me the College was for, its alleged true purpose of galactic social balance. Sociographers did not believe in undefined *chaos*, surely.

Seeing I was still confused, she fetched our coats and we half-drunkenly swayed over to the Astronomics Faculty. After five dark floors of descent, almost when one was expecting a dungeon, the stairs led into the stellarium. Floating orbs romanced one another in anti-gravitic dalliance, one for each world of the Symposium of Humankind, fifteen thousand in all. There around galactic centre was the Symposium itself, where we resided – the heart of the wheel. Then out to the middling worlds, the technical hubs and religious sites; the behethan hatcheries and star blankets. Out again, into the radio shingles where only pioneers dwelled and mostly died – the edge of the civilised, border of the knowable.

Majister Gwendolyn waved her hand and the star systems scurried about in fast-forward, all the little trade routes and diplomatic tangles in a temporal jig.

Space wasn't the only axis the Symposium expanded across. It was mighty wide in time also.

As all schoolchildren of the Symposium knew, there had been twenty-nine collapses and thirty restorations. An empire would rise, then fall over, resulting in ten thousand years of squalor, worlds cut off from worlds. Then some tiny light coddled in cupped hands would reawaken, and another empire would take its place and remember how to build aqueducts and starships. And that empire would collapse and another would take its place, over and over; spring ephemerals, the imperial seasons, administrations cowering from the galactic winter. That was until the Symposium of Humankind of course, the scientific congress of the galaxy; the great bookend of the world. There had been no further collapses since its founding.

Publicly it was the Symposium's belief in democracy and technical advancement that had forestalled another disaster. In reality, I knew now, it was us, the College of Sociographers. In the shadows we tinkered with the valves and dials of the social engine of the galactic community. A thirtieth collapse was always a threat, and virtues like fairness and decency were no guarantee of stability. There must be sages, benevolent muddlers, to bring things back from the brink; modest invisibles, the midwives and undertakers of entire cultures.

It was the golden age of the social engineers.

Hallelujah.

It seemed to me those worlds floating before us were particles maybe, invaluable and indivisible parts of the whole. And just as an extra proton transforms the atom, so might a single deviant world unbalance the safety of the whole Symposium, transmute it into a new, far more unstable element. If the College feared anything, it was this – a crack in a supporting wall that brings the house down.

Still the worlds jangled and spun, and as the map reached the present day, a purple-shaded patch began to grow in empty space.

"And what is *that* region?" I asked, pointing.

"The place our college and the Symposium fear above all else," Majister Gwendolyn said. "The territory of the Big Sisters." On the floor she

sketched the mystery ideograph I'd asked after, the little geometric eye. "The realm beyond mathematics: *Ederlezi.* Where all the anti-truths go."

I'd known she was quite mad, but delusional too? "The Big Sisters are a myth," I said. "Aren't you and I past these strange tests?"

"No more tests. We are tasked with maintaining social balance. And this," she said, almost talking more to the patch of strange new space than to me, "is believed to be the great threat to said social balance, the home of the irredeemably weird. This is what you and I are expected to defend against, silly gosling. This is what we wear the robes for."

"Well, has anyone been inside the forbidden region?" I said, still highly sceptical.

"No. It's *forbidden*."

She enlarged the region and pointed to several worlds just on its border.

"Sirilo, Kom, Otiononia, and Duma. These worlds were settled by human colonies a few millennia ago. Most have devolved back into pre-interstellar cultures. For this reason, they must never be allowed to join the Symposium of Humankind."

"Whatever for?" I said.

"Because they're only a few light years from the alleged Big Sister territories. The College is terrified they'll develop star-travelling technology again and wander inside to commune with the Big Sisters themselves. If they bring back advanced science or strange and alien ideologies, it might unbalance the entire galactic equation, leading to the thirtieth collapse."

"Do *you* believe that?"

She said flatly, "The College tells us it is so, and we mustn't question the College, of course."

"I don't understand. What's so dangerous about a little advanced science?"

"Do you know what you don't know?" she snapped at me.

Drunk and pseudo-philosophical like this, what was the point in humouring her? "I know that I don't know some things, I suppose…"

"And is that a kind of knowledge?"

"Yes, but what if I—

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—commit suicide, I think to myself. That'd be one way to solve this. Or what would happen if I just stopped now, flew home?

I take out my ideolabe and idly push the spokes around until the ideographs approximate the question: *Without a sociographer present, what is Duma's social fate?*

The ideolabe lights up with gold, green, blue staccato pulses, its spokes whirling in thought.

A clockwork brain is still such a silly notion to me even after a century of using one. Yet I understand the necessity of course – if sociographers carried high technology and it fell into the hands of those primitive worlds we quietly preside over, the damage could be irreparable, not just to sociomathematics but inasmuch as one doesn't hand goggles and a flamethrower to a toddler.

The ideolabe clicks into final position, the spokes cyan and pink, their patterns translating as: *98% chance Duma will give in to interstellar expansion within three centuries if left unattended.*

This is unacceptable. Intolerable as my life has become, I'm the only one standing against the river now that the dam has broken, and I'll keep it back with pure desperation if need be.

It's not so bad to stay home, I have tried to tell the Dumans for five years now – by graffiti, by radio plays, by acoustic beacons broadcasting across their cities; any sociopoetic interventions I could think of.

If I were being honest with them I'd say, *Yes, I've seen space, it's very large. But a comfy chair and a good view of the mountains is just as fine for a lifetime. Stay. Make hay. Your world is enough.*

The centre of Imdriso is oddly busy for afternoon. Dogs weave between the urchins, water carafes smash in the fat sun. I wander back towards the forum. A crowd is jostling for view of something.

"Are we waiting for a speech?" I ask an old woman.

"I should think there will be one after," she says.

"After?"

She points to a fence, and I see then it is not the fence she's pointing to at all but beyond it, to the fields where there stands a machine that has now been revealed from a hangar.

A mechanical dragon, cryogenic steam for breath, steel rivets for scales, an assortment of workers busying about at its base. Its design is ancient, the

sort humans haven't built for millennia, but its form is universal.

Twelve hells. A rocket.

Cold dread becomes me. This is a total desecration of my gambit.

"What is going on?" I ask the old woman.

She smiles and says in Duman, "Naadpre," meaning: forward, to go ahead.

Naadpre. I've seen the word everywhere since I arrived but assumed it was a social statement, a try for progress – less meat, more back rubs, that sort of thing. Did they instead mean technologically, galactically? How could I have missed this?

A mahayir is here, a dark agent of sociomathematics; it's the only explanation. Someone is playing with me, making a mockery of my schemes and this great people's history.

I watch in horror awhile feeling very much that I should be doing something, yet knowing there's nothing to do. Could I parsillogise the crowd? Order them to storm the launchpad?

But this is not how sociography works. Tear down a munitions factory without stopping the war and the country will only build another. I must locate the original rot.

The workmen evacuate the launchpad. The rocket's engine lights; liquid fuel by the look of it, primaeval and barbaric, but still it lifts off and climbs, uncertainly at first, then stalwart. The noise eats all the other noise. The light eats all the other light. Soon it is knocking at the sky.

Oh gods. Oh hells. But how can they be—

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—floating, the two of us, Majister Gwendolyn and I, inside her behethan, Bisi. It had been my first longsleep, forty years in the soup cradle, and I woke vomiting and terrified. Majister Gwendolyn was gentle with me, gave me tea then beer, and we spent a day at the porthole.

Space was still a novelty then. I could not quite accept that even if we turned around now and made the forty-year journey back to the College, asleep in our soup cradles, many of my friends would be old, maybe some dead even. And this was only a relatively short journey. Longer assignments would stretch the years to centuries. This was surely why the College

always chose orphans as students and why majisters rarely seemed to grow attached to one another.

Finally we looked down on what she'd taken me decades across the black to see: Otiononia.

The planet was beautiful, an opal, only my second one from orbit.

"So?" Majister Gwendolyn said.

"Pretty. Nice ocean."

"It's the closest you'll ever get to prohibited territory. Enjoy the view while it lasts."

I looked out past the planet and into the forbidden zone. What ancient weirdness was waiting in orbit of *those* nearby worlds? If Majister Gwendolyn was telling the truth – and that was far from assured – then at the very least they contained the tombs of the wisest and most powerful humans to ever exist: the Big Sisters, the actual adults.

But I was not a child and put no faith in children's stories. My majister was testing me or amusing herself with tall tales.

She tapped Bisi's porthole, drawing me back to the world at hand, Otiononia. She said officially, "Type thirty-two culture, polytheistic, highly idiosyncratic, settled here three millennia back, heavy technological backsliding. However, they're a year from perfecting an interstellar drive. College sociomathematicians have determined that if the population is allowed to venture out into space, they'll likely explore the forbidden zone within a century. We may be looking at a tier three destabilisation event. You will solve this. You can use all of the equipment on board, the radio, the ideolabe – I think there's even a missile or two in Bisi's bilge if you want to wreak havoc, but you'll have to fire it yourself; you know how she feels about violence. You have a week."

"What? I didn't know this would be an assignment."

"Good, that way you couldn't prepare."

And realising, I said, "This is my *final* assignment, isn't it? I'm not ready."

"But I am, Erdo. If I stay in this game any longer, I'll knit my toes into carpets. I'll poke out my eyes with letter openers. This is more my resignation as your tutor than your last exam as my student."

I was suddenly panged with guilt for the world below, as though it were an infant. "It's not their fault they settled so close to forbidden territory. Aren't they allowed to decide their own fate? Isn't *that* progress?"

I saw a flash of sympathy in her eyes, then its almost immediate extinguishment. She said, “What progress have *we* had in five thousand years of the Symposium? None if you recall. We have reached the end of technology, possibly even culture. There are no more alleys to escape into.” Visibly disgusted with herself, as though reciting a corporate pledge, she added, “Yet it has done us no harm. With the sun out every day, what’s the problem with repetitive weather? Good luck, silly gosling.”

She left me to Bisi’s main deck, within the strange walls that I suppose were really cartilage, the windows that were really membranes of organic titanium. I was suddenly terribly alone. If I succeeded, I would be made a majister, no longer subject to Gwendolyn’s instruction and fated to flit into this and that as a social engineer. If I failed, I would be expelled from the College.

The world below turned so perfectly and slow, all the equanimity of a baby asleep.

I learned the world-language in two days by way of mnemonics and language tonics. Listening to their broadcasts, the sociographic problem was not hard to diagnose: they were a knowledge-loving people and wished to explore the stars around them.

More problematic though was the catalyst for all this, I discovered. Ruins had been unearthed several decades before, strange artifacts; mechanisms and objects of a design unfamiliar to the Otiononians. They surmised these objects were left behind by previous creatures, perhaps another more advanced species of human. Their curiosity had become ravenous.

What would a sociographer from one of the other schools of the College have done? Blown up the interstellar drive research labs, maybe. Fomented a political revolt.

Messy affairs, blunt hammers. But we were sociopoets.

I did the numbers for the gambit myself and confirmed it with the ideolabe. The Otiononians had a word for conspiracy: *erafo.* It was pejorative, to refer to a dim-witted theory about the world invented by one who can’t handle complexity.

There was already a conspiracy theory floating around that the ‘artifacts’ had been placed by the various governments of Otiononia to inspire the population into supporting interstellar travel. What, I wondered, would happen if *erafo* ceased being an insult?

I took Bisi's shuttle down to the media centre of the capital city. Then it was only a matter of sneaking my way in with parsillogy and implanting a single idea in the mind of the radio scheduler: *A conspiracy theorist is one who has seen behind the veils of the world, into the diabolical schemes of those who muddle and deceive.*

My finishing brush stroke – and I must say I was rather proud of this – was to manufacture cheap plastic imitations of the artifacts, clearly fake, and drop them over the major cities from orbit. Soon many believed the entire business of this ancestor race and their remains to be a hoax.

Within five days the interstellar drive laboratories were attacked, then shut down. The artifacts were rounded up and destroyed. The narrative had shifted completely by the end of the week.

Exploring the stars became a foolhardy, if not perilous notion, and only four hundred people had died in the ensuing violence.

Majister Gwendolyn resurfaced on the last evening bearing sparkling wine as congratulations, but she did not smile.

"You don't enjoy this," I said.

"Subverting worlds? Not any more than one should like lying to children or torturing the elderly."

"Then why did you become a majister, for hells' sake?"

We stared at each other; I was just as surprised as she. I'd never spoken to her like this before. But I was a majister now, I thought to myself, or would officially be one soon. And a few moments later the surprise faded from her face, perhaps accepting that we were equals, in theory at least.

She said, "I took up sociography for the same reason as you. To do good. Let's say we differ in our opinions on the proper route to that good."

"Well, the Otiononians are safe anyway," I said, attempting to congratulate myself if she would not do it. After all, by then I knew what the consequence was if a world on the border of the forbidden zone would not abandon its spacefaring ambitions. I had seen pictures of planetary ruins, irradiated and empty save for cockroaches and dust.

We drank watching the world turn below us, night to day and back again; this great inertial process set in motion long before we came, to continue long after we left.

When we were drunk enough to slur, she fetched a majister's blue sash from her effects and tied it over me. It was traditional to offer a little speech

at this point, but instead she locked me with a stare and a silence.

“You created those old artifacts and those ruins, didn’t you?” I said. “To test Otiononia, or to test me.”

“They’re real,” she said. “The College would prefer you don’t know that. The Big Sisters left those things. That is the truth.”

“Then where are they now, these *old ones*?” I said, barely able to conceal my disbelief.

“Maybe they just tired of life.” We looked out of Bisi’s porthole again, beyond Otiononia, to the black treacle of what if.

She said, “It’s not just another galactic collapse that the Symposium worries over. Rather, it’s what comes before the collapse. They believe the mind cannot handle contact with technology and ideas far beyond the limits of its comprehension, the kind the Big Sisters created: a razor that never blunts, a candle that never runs down. These sorts of confrontations would lead to madness, our superiors insist. *Sublimia syndrome*, they call it, the disease that supposedly befalls the human intellect when it tries to reckon with something unreckonable. But we will go out there one day you know, into the forbidden zone. And the adventure will be fantastic.” She offered her glass in a toast and, quoting Sufi the great poet, said, “The mystery of things is not in the stars, but in ourselves. There’s more wonder in the thought of raising one’s hand, then simply raising one’s hand with a thought, than resides in all the black holes of the universe.”

I nodded because there was nothing else to say.

We finished the wine and raced about after each other in Bisi’s chambers like bubbles in stirred coffee, dancing in zero-gravity, trying backflips and pirouettes, and for a moment Majister Gwendolyn was not three hundred but twenty-one perhaps, as though all her years had washed off her face.

Sobering, we changed into our slumber robes and stepped into our soup cradles, preparing to sleep the forty years home.

I said, “What if sublimia is a real disease? What if minds really can’t bear contact with the transcendent?”

She said, “Then we would be plagued with it already, confronted with the scale of the infinite cosmos, or by the simple strangeness of finding ourselves alive. Besides, madness is a small price to pay for communing with the magnificent unknown.” Then quoting Sufi once more: “We find these worlds always with terrible dementia. Old, but believing themselves young. Terrified, but declaring themselves the only light in all the dark. Our

work is never finished and we've only just begun. Goodnight Majister Erdo." And I did not bow for she was no longer my superior, nor I her subordinate. I watched her slip into that gelatinous bed of amino acids and soporifics that would preserve her body and prolong her doubts across the stars, all the way home to our castle of loving spies.

Bisi accelerated out of orbit and we set off once again for that light of all the worlds, the lantern of all knowledge, the Symposium. For I think—

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—a rocket where a rocket should not be is proof of mathematical mishap. *Izgubna*, the Dumans would say in their oddly specific language: a tragedy out of nowhere for nothing's sake.

I wait until the rocket disappears into the afternoon sky, then return to my apartment and attempt to devise a new gambit.

If the Dumans perfect rocketry, then in a few years they'll send a human up. Another decade maybe and they'll wander over to one of their moons. Next: another planet. A century later – barely two sleeps in terms of the way I travel across space – they'll get around to gravitic inversion technology and be on their way to exploring Big Sister territory. Simply unacceptable.

I spend the afternoon on a correction to my original gambit, restoring control, reasserting over and over through sociopoetics that the stars are not for exploring; *There's plenty to do at home.* This time around though I add a dictatorial operator – a push for planetary discipline by demonising the citizens of Khasala, the rival city to the west of Imdriso.

Solidarity is always easier with an enemy. If successful, the gambit will strengthen the Duman government's hold on their culture, turn things a little authoritarian, but nothing they won't recover from. Fascism is a difficult ideology to implement; humans are generally too clever to hate their neighbours without some charismatic idiot telling them to. The gambit will likely take twenty-five years or so to complete. Any faster and the population will push back with compassion. No matter, I'll execute it from orbit and sleep those years away this time in Bisi's soup cradle.

I wait for Bisi to pass overheard, in orbit of Duma now, and send off several radio pulses. There is a pause, then a groan comes in reply. I send

more pulses equating to something like: *Send the shuttle down to collect me.*

Only another groan answers this. I try fruitlessly for an hour. What is that stupid creature up to? She was strange on our climb out from the Symposium, disobedient, distracted, flipping about and altering our heading, but it's been half a century since. Besides, with me down here she's had nothing to do but relax for five years, orbiting a dead moon to keep out of the way.

"Listen," I say down the radio, pointless since I'm sure these beasts barely understand language. "I need you to send the shuttle down now. Do you want me to take your colour retinas out again?"

There's no reply. When all this is over, when we return to the College, I'll have her electrically disciplined. Bisi is a primitive animal, and isn't it ironic that as a starship of the Sociographer's College no less, an institution principally concerned with order and control, we should use unwieldy disobedient brutes to travel into this and that? The Dumans are backwards, but at least rockets do as they're told. It could easily be—

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—Majister Gwendolyn and I in the vineyard of the College, the scene lit only by the moons. Beyond the vineyard, the gardens were humming with throngs of scholars. It was Strovan's Day, when the great galactic calculations of the College were officially updated, and the new sociomathematics told us what to fear and what to draw near to.

Majister Gwendolyn had no stomach for gatherings and suggested we retire to the vineyard and drink. I suggested being social for a bit. She suggested I insert sharp objects into a delicate orifice. And so we found ourselves laying in the vineyard.

I watched some spindly little insect climbing to the edge of a leaf to look out. Behind it in perfect relief were the stars.

Gwendolyn muttered, "You'd think that if the galaxy can be pushed around by sociomathematics, someone would run the numbers and get it right the first time. We wouldn't need new sets of equations each cycle."

"Sure, but what are we without a grand model?"

"Free?" she said with disgust. "Undestined? Human beings?"

My new blue robes had gone to my head a little. I said, “We’re at the end of science. The only technology left to refine now is order.”

“Oh, there’s plenty left to discover,” she purred.

I scoffed, “Oh gods, this Big Sister nonsense again?”

She fixed me coldly, an unusual moment of sincerity for her. “Twenty-nine collapses and counting. Are we really to believe every world fell apart each time? What if some human family or faction made it through, evolved past us?”

“Uh-huh,” I murmured. “And what if red was blue and five was two plus two…”

“Are you so allergic to the idea that the *real* adults wait for us out there in the black? Is it so repugnant to imagine there are people who consider kindness the final technology?”

I said, “We’re not fallen angels, we’re mud that sat up. This is as good as it gets.”

She swore at me under her breath for a while and returned to drinking.

I looked once more to the little insect on its little leaf, then the stars beyond it.

Here I was at the edge of my leaf, staring out. If there were beings more enlightened than us, humans gone beyond human, then perhaps I would seem no less an insect to them; the gulf of understanding just as wide as between that little bug and me.

This was exactly why they couldn’t exist. For if they did, then we could never out-think them, not even with the most sophisticated sociomathematics. They would present an impossible ideal. They would bring chaos into all things. Just their very existence would mean I—

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—wake up in the street. I am not lying in the gutter but dressed and standing on my feet with the sense of breaking out from a dream. The last five or six hours are simply gone. This is far from the first time it has happened, these sudden memory lapses. I read something years ago about prolonged soup cradle use triggering sporadic amnesia, and such is the explanation I have settled on. Well, it’s hardly the most urgent issue at present.

I climb a grain silo at the edge of Imdriso, my satchel full of equipment. The pirate radio beacon is easy enough to set up, and I mumble idly to myself beneath the white fire of the moons. Normally I'd just broadcast something down from Bisi, but since she's gone temporarily mad, this is the next best option.

The police shouldn't be able to find the beacon for days. I've recorded a few minutes of parsillogy; nonsense on a conscious level, but perfectly understandable to the Duman subconscious. Played over and over it should have a rallying effect on the population, inspire a kind of wild confidence in their cities, and a sensible hatred of outsiders. A little quick and dirty, granted, but fracturing the population like this will stop them reaching for space until I can work out where this strange rocket fascination is coming from.

I admire their tenacity, really I do, reaching for the stars. But they are children lost in play, *legovo*, they would say – the state of dancing into traffic. And it is only I who—

"What are you doing?"

A watchman or some such has approached.

"Radio survey," I say.

"You're not supposed to be up here." He reaches for his baton.

"Now how," I say. "Was that snow in the shoe or the broken pallbearer boring the grim snores anew?"

His fighting hand relaxes. "An indigo coven," I say. He sits. "A sheep's wake." He lets go of the baton. Trying to ascertain if he's told others of my presence already, I ask him, "Did morning crest the doleful sands?" A flash of conflict in his eyes, a battle within. He says nothing. What is this?

"Or step down the trinket's teeth, the ogre's foot compliant?" Still nothing, only now he reaches for the baton again. Somehow he is resisting.

"Comport," I say slowly. "How many eves ago the lamb brought forth the rose?"

"Ten," he says involuntarily. "And tweaked the leper's nose…"

The night is cold but I am sweating. This is not ambiguous. He has the capacity to resist. Someone has gotten to him first. Another sociographer is here on Duma, a mahayir in the mist.

I should be—

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—looping the G’s and crossing the T’s. Every now and then I could convince myself this was a letter or journal I was writing, but of course there was more to it than that. And how ridiculous it would sound to read aloud: *The castigations thrummed in tow, the fire consorted up below, then braved to pounce the truth crouched low, and none could count the moon.*

It had come time to pen my literafact, the verbal tomb of my mind. Majister Gwendolyn taught me the method and oh gods it was wonderful, writing not what one wished to say, only what one said – and in this way my consciousness would be preserved, apparently. When I was dead, my being stored in this thing, a crypt of paper, would anyone thaw me out, I wondered? Would I be reread just briefly back into life?

That was how I spent my days, preserving my soul in verse, and in the evenings I would meet Majister Gwendolyn and we would drink and spar properly now, our sticks poised above the sandpit; equals, or so I liked to think, playing at our ideographic war games.

Eggs scattered to the temple, she would write in the sand.

But whence the fever of the wind? I’d reply.

In your pocket, dim and slow, the ovum of the night… she would write and I’d fall over, temporarily paralysed by her parsillogy.

She marked my mistakes in real-time, correcting prepositions to make the gambit even stronger, my teacher as ever, until the sand was a convocation of our chicken scratch madness. And I suspected she was going just that: mad, at least judging by the intensity of her sparring. For something was coming upon the College, a cloud sliding down the mountain.

Majister Serns and Majister Otepi had both been taken for questioning and not returned, their offices empty as a zombie’s grave.

I asked Gwendolyn of it. “They are suspected of being mahayirs…” she said.

“The mahayirs are real then?”

“As much as witches and dragons,” she said and rolled her eyes. It was almost at that exact moment Bisi passed by the window, titanium scales glinting, her great bulk soaring through the afternoon in anti-grav repose, not too undragon-like it seemed to me.

I looked down to the courtyard and saw two more enforcers approaching. For Gwendolyn, for I? I knew I was no spy. Her though, was it possible?

In an attempt to diffuse the tension, I returned to our game in the sandpit and said, “How did you win that one, crone?”

“Only children respond completely to discipline,” she said, tapping at our sociopoetic mess. “I won not because I’m clever, but because you think force is the only mode of power. I chose to rebel and that is my freedom. You have no choice in opposing me and that is your bondage. Look at your face now, red and confounded. So will it continue to be for as long as you think people can be whipped and kicked and bitten into submission.”

I peeked out the window again. The enforcers turned into our tower.

Mahayirs, saboteur mathematicians hiding among us in the College, was that really the threat? So went the myth anyway; that they were trying to destroy our operation from inside and provoke an expansion into Big Sister space.

I understood being cautious, but questioning every majister and their mothers? It seemed paranoid in the extreme.

“Gwendolyn,” I said, using her name for the first time in maybe a year. She looked up from the sandpit to greet me with eyes of reciprocating gravity. “Are you a mahayir?”

She did not answer. I made to repeat my question, but she only put on her night shawl and waved me quiet. The two enforcers stood in her doorway. “Majister,” they said.

“Complete your literafact, work on nothing else,” she whispered to me. Then she finished her wine, poured another, finished that, and spat on the floor.

They walked her out. I kept my eyes on the sandpit as though, among the grains and infinity, among the ideographs and operators, there was—

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—a racket like a dying sun. Leaping out of bed, I catch the source of the noise passing my window. Another rocket, larger than the first, and with a cockpit this time. I turn on the radio and the announcer confirms the rocket is piloted, an astronaut on board.

I push ideographs around on paper for a desperate hour, then kick the desk over, stamp on it a bit, and decide on a new approach.

If a mahayir is on Duma, then even the most powerful gambit in the world can’t stop them because I can’t calculate their intentions. They’ll

contaminate everything. And what is left when reason has failed?

Violence, of course.

The streets are full of cheering celebrants, the sky awash with streamers and balloons. Yes, well done, I think to myself – you've made the most elementary of steps towards space. Little do you know my behethan orbits your tiny world, a living starship no less, millennia ahead of your understanding.

I know who to punish for this. I push through the puerile dancing and at last reach the house of Avarian, the chief scientist of the Scholar's Guild – no doubt the one most responsible for the launch today.

I hammer on his window. No answer. I go around the back and kick in the door.

I look for letters, communications, and come instead upon relics. They're hidden away but barely; cabinets full of Big Sister trinkets and orbs, endless sketches and notes Avarian has made speculating on their mechanisms. Futile of course, like a fish trying to backwards engineer a bicycle.

I march upstairs half-wondering if I shouldn't burn the house down to send a message. And there is a set of those stone tablets again, a language I recognise on a medium too old to know it; the Duman that can't be Duman. Avarian has notes for those too, claims he's used carbon-14 to date them and confirms the tablets are over ninety-thousand years old. Utterly impossible.

Duman is a beautiful language, certainly. I do understand the impulse to tell fictions about its birth. Many at the College call it 'the scalpel tongue' for how very efficient it can be, seeming to possess dedicated words for every emotional state, every frisson and passing thought. Majister Gwendolyn talked of it often when she was alive, claimed it was the only language of not just words, but *exactly correct words.*

Staring at Avarian's spoils, I realise that these tablets are dictionaries of a sort. They are ordered not by alphabet, but by concept; many of the words the Dumans still use today.

Assoret: the love one feels for their past selves, wishing we could tell them all will be well.

Ekmi: the luxurious comfort of sleeping beneath a weighted blanket on a cold night.

Manaema: the sense that, however badly things are going, a single pleasant coincidence might save it all.

I learned Duman before arriving of course, despite the fifty-year gap in which it would change as I travelled to the world. Still, I had not given much thought to its uniqueness.

Now in a strange intuitive way I see Gwendolyn's fascination with the tongue. It invites as much as it points; signifies as much as it leaves out: the way a plural is denoted at the start of a noun; the way adjectives are inseparably married to their verbs. If I were to build a language, a true language, it might well look like this.

But it is not ancient, of course. These tablets are forgeries, perhaps by the mahayir on this world who even now is leaving their hands in every plan of mine. The obvious question though is *why*? What does a mahayir stand to gain by convincing these people their history is older than they believe? Well, what if the—

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—offices of the College were almost all vacant by then, in the Theoretics Tower at least. How long before the enforcers came for me next?

Usually the Symposium left the College alone, giving us ample space to do our work. Clearly the threat of galactic collapse was enough to have incurred their wrath now.

I tried to concentrate, to finish my literafact, but each day I only had to look over my balcony to see more majisters taken for questioning and few returning. I quietly asked around and everyone seemed to be working on their own literafacts – preparing for possible executions.

Even if we finished in time, where would we hide these scrolls, I wondered? And who would keep them safe if we were all in danger?

On the fifth day of Majister Gwendolyn's absence, I checked her office and found a huddled mass of rags in the corner. She was shivering, barely able to catch her breath. "Madam…" I said. "What has happened to you?"

Slowly she recovered herself and demanded vodka which, after my protestations were ignored, I delivered.

"The enforcers believe a rebellion is coming," she rasped.

"Of mahayirs?" I said. She nodded. "But how many can there really be? Do you think they've infiltrated the College?" She shook her head. And

knowing it was the wrong moment but unable to resist curiosity, I said, “Madam, you must be honest so I can help you. Are you a mahayir?”

She grabbed my robe and yelled, “There are no damn mahayirs, do you hear? It’s a ghost story, a threat to scare little sociomathematicians into eating their vegetables and algebra.”

“You’re a Big Sister sympathiser though,” I said. “That much is true, I know it.”

“Of course I am! As are our colleagues. As would you be if you believed our race deserves a shred of dignity. Had I a Big Sister sat across from me I would ask it all those questions my ideolabe is incapable of answering: why are we here, where are we going, and how is it we’re so awful to each other? They were wise, Erdo. That is why the Big Sisters are gone. They have moved out of the house, left us to our muddles. And we would be right to chase after.” Then just for a moment a weaker, older Gwendolyn peeked out of her eyes. “The enforcers will come back for me. Please don’t tell them I said those things.”

I held her as close as I could and said, “Never. Show me how to help you…” Not realising I meant it until the words had assembled themselves in my mouth and climbed out, I added, “You’re all I have. I don’t think I could live without you.”

She lay back in my arms, seemingly moments from unconsciousness and quoted the poet Sufi to me, to herself: “As ever, we strive for the continuation of our kin, the warmth of the sun, and the days of wild unknowing. Such will these things preserve conscious beings until the closing of time.”

I nodded, knowing that it—

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—hardly matters what this bastard mahayir does now. With Bisi’s soup cradle, I have all the time I need. I hike out to the forest beyond Imdriso and find a clearing. I radio Bisi one last time, demanding she sends the shuttle down. A mumble from her, then silence.

Well, as you prefer then. I rig the radio to mimic a behethan infant in danger and begin broadcasting. An hour later I spot Bisi on the horizon, a distant fleck falling through the clouds, then larger until she is rolling about, yawing wildly across the sky like she’s drunk. She comes down with no

grace, smashing into the clearing and continuing for several hundred feet, trees collapsing in her wake. What is wrong with her? I've never seen a behethan so clumsy and impudent.

Her belly is scorched from atmospheric re-entry but her hull seems to be intact. Inside is a mess, papers and equipment everywhere, though no major damage. I check her vitals. Her endocrines are manic, monisterone levels way into the red.

"What is it, star thing?" I call out through her corridors.

A bass warble comes in reply.

Everything is off, her internal temperature, her neuroequilibriums. I don't have enough behethan medical training to guess at what the problem is.

I raid the pharma bay for antibiotics and find some, a syringe taller than I am. I spy a suitable vein in the library and inject her. Then, hoping if it's an infection that'll take care of the problem for now, I get ready for sleep.

It is said that soup cradles were once used by behethans for catching material to eat, back when they roamed as wild beasts through interstellar space. Now I pray quietly as I always do that Bisi does not grow hungry while I sleep in her soup cradle and dissolve and ingest me.

Dressed in my slumber robes, I check my new gambit one last time. It is unorthodox, but with the mahayir present there's nothing else for it. Majister Gwendolyn taught me this move: when all else is lost, tell the truth.

This afternoon I broke into the Scholar's Guild, disabled the guards with parsillogy, and confronted Avarian in his office. I explained that I am from a distant world, that there are many other worlds in fact, and it was imperative Duma cease in its spacefaring endeavours. If he helped me with this thing, I would see to it he becomes the first minister of Imdriso, and by extension, supreme leader of Duma itself.

He was sceptical of course, so I assured him I knew that he was distributing exotic contraband and demanded to know his intentions.

"*Lyuboznaya*…" he said, meaning: curiosity for the sake of it. Clearly he still thought I was just some burglar madman.

I told him to summon a mathematician. She arrived and I asked what the three biggest problems in the mathematics of the time were. She presented them.

I retired to the corridor to consult my ideolabe and returned with the solutions. She checked them over with a gasp and confirmed they were correct.

Avarian seemed convinced at last. I said to him, “You will destroy every artifact in your home. Next you will disassemble the crime ring distributing them. After that, I’ll make you powerful.” I raised a finger of paternal instruction. “But the stars are not for your people, do you understand?”

He nodded gravely. He was mine now. I had already initiated the sub-gambit, guaranteeing his election to first minister: a few lines of graffiti in the central forum accusing the current first minister of adultery. Unfounded, dishonourable, yet sociopoetically irresistible.

Now I set the soup cradle’s chronometer for five years, since I cannot trust Bisi to wake me in her present strange state. If all goes well, with Avarian both fearing and needing me, this will be the last time I—

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—completely panic. It was agreed that the threat of violence had become too ubiquitous on the College grounds for many majisters. Those of us who did not wish to be interrogated by the enforcers further retreated to the high chambers of the Theoretics Tower. I took nothing but my robe, ideolabe, and papers. Majister Gwendolyn took only her whisky bottle. I carried her through the winding stairways, her body still fragile from the week of torture. Twenty or so more majisters joined us up there. We barricaded the doors, then force-fielded them and tentatively hoped the enforcers would grow tired and abandon us eventually.

They did not.

I suppose in their position, I wouldn’t have either. Even if just one of us was a traitor, the result would be the same. Sociography could never be trusted again, meaning the College was useless, meaning the Symposium might collapse.

Soon the banging and yelling came, then battering rams at the door. Out the window was a two-hundred-foot drop, no escape possible that way either, but one of the majisters made contact with an ally in the behethan pens and claimed flying help was coming.

The evening dragged, more knocking and yelled threats. We were all suspected mahayirs now. We shouted parsillogy through the door in

desperation, but of course it didn’t work. Either the guards’ ears were blocked with cotton, or their minds were shut with training.

Majister Gwendolyn had begun to regain her strength at least. She waited at the window, watching for Bisi, I supposed. What kind of battle was occurring in the behethan pens, we did not know. Perhaps the resistance had been neutralised already and we were the last to hold out.

Oh gods, there it came again, louder, the battering, the explosions at the windows, our defences buckling under the weight of the Symposium’s most malicious engineering.

Gwendolyn took my hand. “Well,” she said. “What better time than now to finish writing your literafact?”

“If this gets worse, there’ll be no one to read it…” I said.

“Then let’s bet on the future being kinder than the present.” And so, as if the cacophony of the siege were only ambient music for study, she lured me back to penning consciousness itself, to transmuting one’s mind into words, to scattering—

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—vomit everywhere. Then I vomit again. I have woken from longsleep on my feet. The soup cradle amnesia is worsening.

Through bleary eyes I confirm by its dial what the chronometer beeps at me already: five years asleep. Admittedly, it’s several days beyond the date I specified, but perhaps Bisi’s subsystems are being affected by her recent madness.

A few hours of chugging electrolytes and checking Bisi over, then I hike on shaking legs back into Imdriso.

Duman fashion has changed just ever so slightly, tending towards more modest coveralls. I overhear that new slang has entered the vernacular, but nothing too radical.

From the forum I see the old rocket launchpad is abandoned, falling apart. Excellent.

I burst into the first minister’s office of the House of Parliament. Heading the table is Avarian, dressed in official robes now. That plan was also successful it seems.

His face drains pale and he dismisses his entourage.

“Greetings, First Minister. You’ve discontinued space exploration?” I ask.

“Where have you been?” he splutters.

“*You’ve discontinued space exploration*?”

He nods. “Yes, though—”

“And there’s been no public pushback?”

“Not really. But—”

“Perfect. Now you’ll destroy all rocketry blueprints and make any expansionist talk punishable by life imprisonment, do you understand?”

“I do, yes. However.”

Sheepishly he hands me a photograph. A space-suited figure stands amid a plain of magnificent desolation, the stars overhead. On the suit’s shoulder is a patch: the flag of Khasala, Imdriso’s cantankerous neighbour to the west.

“Last year…” he murmurs. “They declared themselves independent and made a successful moon landing. They’ll try for the second moon next month.”

Through teeth I can barely open I say, “Why didn’t you stop them?”

“That would mean war…”

“I told you to do *anything*,” I yell and smash the desk. “Do you understand that this is bigger than you? Do you understand what the collapse of the Symposium would mean? What’s a tiny fallout on some savage planet off in the armpit of the galaxy? Why—” His fearful stare cuts me off. Gods, what have I become?

“Have there been signs of another?” I say, attempting to sound neutral. “Another like me here, from the stars?” Avarian shakes his head.

“Well, does the first minister of Khasala have an advisor?” I ask.

“Surely, yes...” he stammers.

“No, an *off-world* advisor, like I am to you. Are there rumours of this?”

Avarian shrugs desperately but it explains everything: the broken gambits, the social chaos, and the Khasalan defiance with its bastard space programme. There *is* a mahayir here, in control of the Khasalan government, just as I control the Imdrisan government. We are puppeteers who may only strike each other by the mostly deftly lifted strings.

“If there are any further attempts at spaceflight, I expect you to use force. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” he says. “But shouldn’t we be—

*

—garnishing the clocks and mending the flowers; it was from heaven's palm that I took the knowledge and the wine.

It felt good to write that way, letting the thing simply express itself as though the story were already waiting inside of me. And in a sense it did wait inside of me, since it was my consciousness bleeding out for posterity after all. Fifty pages of my literafact. How could I be sure when I was done? Doesn't the mind go down forever? "You'll know, because you'll see yourself staring back from the page," Gwendolyn had told me, and I almost believed her.

We'd kept the enforcers back so far, but the game would not go on forever. The door was beginning to buckle; the force fields were flickering. Was it Gwendolyn they wanted?

Often she would stand over me, a hand on my shoulder as I worked, never intervening. Many times I wondered at the point of the endeavour – if the enforcers broke in, they'd surely burn all the parchment, make ashes of my work and the other literafacts here, and that would be that. Or perhaps Gwendolyn meant to scatter it all out the window, pages of our souls floating down into the courtyard…

What would happen if one could only find half of my manuscript, or found it all but read it out of order? Would I appear in the reader's mind talking backwards, or gone completely mad perhaps? Would I—

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—wake already dressed again. I'm standing on a quiet street in Imdriso. I don't remember coming to from the soup cradle. These episodes are growing worrisome. Well, they're not a direct impediment to my work at least. I'll have the College examine me upon my triumphant return.

I resettle into myself. Another five years have passed, it seems. Imdriso is still intact when I tour it, though the presence of guards is now overt. So too are Imdrisan flags; they hang not just from official buildings but houses too, as though city pride is enforced.

Soon this pride will spread to the other cities, the whole world walling itself off from itself; isolationism as a memetic disease. My gambit will then be complete.

I break into Avarian's bedroom in the House of Parliament. He's just as horrified to see me as the last time. I demand a report on the half-decade of my absence. He hands me a sheet of documents clearly prepared in advance and explains tensions with Khasala have heightened; that they still launch rockets, though only to other moons of Duma. "I told you to use violence in this event," I say. "Why did you ignore me?"

"*Prichinea*," he says, meaning: the use of one's own will and reason.

There will be consequences for this. I'll make sure of it.

I leaf through the documents. Khasala has commandeered the crude oil reservoirs nearby for making kerosene, rocket fuel. Imdriso has responded with sanctions.

"Shoot them down, every single rocket," I say.

"That will be war…"

"And then there will be peace after," I snap.

"At what cost?"

I'm speechless for a moment. The cheek of him. "You defy me, cretin?" I throw a few paintings off the wall, put my foot through them.

I go to continue shouting – it feels excellent after all – when I spot a number of tablets on the mantelpiece, all of them covered in the *ancient* Duman script. "What in hells are you doing with these? Didn't I tell you to destroy every artifact?"

Sheepishly he murmurs, "They are the original tongue, our language."

"They are fakes!" I roar. "Your people arrived here only a few millennia back, not *one hundred thousand years.* I want these gone. Actually—" I stow them in my satchel. He simply cannot be trusted.

I lean across his desk and try to inject my tone with gravel. "Do as you have been told and your people will have peace from now until the end of time. Disobey me and my superiors will turn your society to ash. Do you understand?"

He nods, defeated.

It hits me all of a sudden how pitiable he is. He didn't mean to end up in this position. He's just a child pulling at levers. "Look," I say. "Wiping out a world is very rare. In fact, I'm not sure the Symposium has resorted to such a thing in generations. But it's better than the alternative, so please *give* me an alternative."

He nods again.

I bid him another pleasant five years and whistle all the way back to Bisi, enjoying my first sense of serenity in, objectively speaking, two decades now.

I'm getting back into my slumber robes when I catch sight of my satchel, weighed down from Avarian's tablets. Curiosity gets the better of me.

Bisi is stocked with all sorts of largely useless equipment. I find the analyser in the laboratory, a great beast of snaking pipes and bellows, and scrape a little dust off one of the tablets. I drink tea while the machine does its analysing, then replenish Bisi's water levels and check her hull integrity.

The answer is waiting for me in the laboratory when I return. The tablet is approximately one hundred thousand years old.

How is this possible?

Perhaps it's an elaborate hoax left by the mahayir to test me; not unthinkable, the Duman script added afterwards onto ancient blank tablets? But where would one get ancient *blank tablets* in the first place?

I finally make an effort to read the script. They are pages of a dictionary, just like the others.

Osero: the sense of being terribly hurt by, and desperately in love with someone at the same time.

Mi'tak: the name for a person who always gifts excellent presents.

And there is a term I haven't seen in almost a century: *Ederlezi*, Majister Gwendolyn's strange mathematical operator denoted by the little eye. Benevolent chaos, the tablet describes it as. The liberation one enjoys when they learn to let go of final answers.

What can a person possibly make of that? And what in hells is the word doing *here*?

It begins as white heat on my neck, then a sense that my feet are too light, as though gravity is becoming unbuckled.

Running from twilight.

Making contact with the horrible infinite.

Putting one step on the mountain of Big Maybe, and deciding it might be best to turn around, walk home, and never leave the house again.

Sublimia syndrome. The paralysing fear that even one's most basic assumptions about the world are incorrect, or about to be heavily warped at least.

A deep breath. Another. The fear calms slightly, settles around me like smoke.

I look forward to a time when this disease has specialists to attend to it.

Oh, Gwendolyn. If I could undead you just for a day, an hour – I know you'd pull me out of these confusions.

But you're gone, vacated, unreachable, your body beneath the soil of the College, and all I have are speckled memories. I just hope you were proud of me, if only for a brief moment, if only—

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—with her huddled before the sunlit window, she appeared a silhouette of death. The worst of her injuries were healed, but with the enforcers at most a few hours from breaking in, it hardly mattered. Exhausted from penning my literafact, I joined her, and in silent agreement we began work on the last of the wine.

"Is this the end of it all?" I asked. "Of sociography, I mean."

Gwendolyn said, "No of course not, and we don't need to check an ideolabe for that. There'll be more of us after. But it might be the end of the resistance."

"Resistance?" I whispered. Was this finally her admission?

"Of course. Those who will not be told that the future is cordoned off."

"But sublimia—" I started.

"Is a myth," she snapped. "Or perhaps a condition we will one day cure, just as we licked polio and the cancers so long ago. The seas are fierce, but that is no reason to stay in port. Erdo, with all your theorems and gambits, with that robe so proudly about your shoulders and a misguided sense of duty to match, even you want to know if the Big Sisters were real."

The door shuddered with the battering ram. The force fields at the window flickered and moaned. I said, "*Were* they real?"

"Of course, silly gosling."

"But they're gone. Not a word from them in ever. They *must* be gone."

"And neither do we spend so much time talking to ants. Perhaps they're extinct, yes. Or perhaps they found pastures new. One day someone must confirm it, else—

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—another five years and I wake on my feet again, these hangovers growing awful now. I am in Avarian's office this time with no context. What a perfect case study in soup cradle amnesia I'm becoming.

Avarian offers me a stack of paper, his political reports.

Still the Khasalans launch their damned rockets and have automated probes orbiting nearby planets now. Presumably humans will go out there next.

"I should have you publicly flogged," I say. "If you will not end this with cleverness, then I'll give you the tools for another approach." I snatch some parchment from his desk and begin drawing up the plans for a gravitic cannon. The College would not condone this, but they're not here to stop me.

The Dumans have some knowledge of space-bending, perhaps from their own sciences, perhaps brought by their ancestors. It's only a small conceptual leap to gravitic weapons.

The plans finished, I pace about his office reading more of his reports. My stomach is all knots. There is some kind of call-and-response effect at work here. I implement isolationism in Imdriso, and Khasala only becomes more inclusive and communitarian. I have Khasala's access to kerosene cut off, and they switch to hydrogen as a fuel for their rockets instead.

I tap the blueprint for the gravitic cannon platforms. "Build these, as many as you can. If there are *any* further attempts at spaceflight, use them. Do you understand?"

He nods gravely; gravely because I've put this thing on his shoulders, but if political decisions are so difficult, perhaps he chose the wrong profession.

I catch myself in the mirror of his office. I look gaunt and crazed, a lunatic. Surely Avarian savours the years when I'm absent, the monster sleeping.

I say, "Do you drink?" Uncertainly he produces a bottle of Duman whisky and pours me a glass. "Please, have one yourself, First Minister."

He pours that uncertainly too and we sit and watch the Imdrisan skyline.

It is good just to be for a few minutes. I say, "I've treated you awfully. Ask me whatever you like of the stars and I'll give you the truth."

He eyes me for a moment, likely wondering if this is a trick. Then he says very carefully, "How old is humanity?"

“Oh gods, trust you to start with an impossible question. We’ve been spacefaring for at least eight hundred thousand years, that much I know. But there have been many societal collapses, so our true history is rather muddled. We’re currently in the fifth year of the only empire to endure: the Symposium. Symposium years last around one thousand Duman years, corresponding to one millionth of the time it takes for the centre of the galaxy to complete a single rotation. So, for a millennium now it has been The Year of Calm and Plenty. That is, the Symposium presently focuses on stability and ample resources until such a time that we enter a new year and find a new ethos.”

He thinks for a moment with wide eyes and says, “What is the Symposium, really?”

I whistle. “The greatest galactic conglomerate ever established. It stretches from Faroni to Ruse, over ten thousand light years wide.”

“Was there a first world?”

“Mm…” I murmur into my glass. “There’s dispute about that. Some believe we’re a combination of species that originated on different worlds. Others find that ridiculous and insist we originated on *one* world. Genetic modification has become so widespread that it’s very difficult to imagine what a *human* originally looked like in its authentic state. In any case we’re yet to find proof of a mother planet. We’ve forgotten our roots, just like you.”

There are tears in his eyes now. He says quietly, “All my life I looked up to the stars dreaming of life among them, that it would visit us someday. I thought they would bring technology. I thought they would be wise and kind. Now you tell me the stars are teeming with life, with humans, only they have no interest in us.”

I lean forward in a manner I hope seems comforting and say, “But we’re *terribly* interested in you, Avarian. I studied your culture for years before I left the Symposium. There are entire faculties devoted to your language, to your history. You must understand it’s your sacrifice here today, it’s your agreeing not to explore the space around you, that keeps the rest of us alive.”

“Well, you do speak our language well enough, I suppose.” A veiled insult; he’s at least playing with the idea of resistance.

“Thanks,” I say. I tap the blueprints for the gravitic cannon. “And besides, I *have* brought you technology.”

“I was rather hoping for something more…”

“Starship-like?” He nods. “Be assured, friend, if I gave that to you now, it would only lead to—

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—deathly confusion. In the dusty siege, Gwendolyn began singing to me. It was not the parsillogical recounting of the Big Sisters, as she used to so enjoy inflicting on me. Rather it was the story of a young girl born on some distant lithium world.

She is poor, her family unable to afford passage to the Symposium hub. She makes a living collecting animal bones for the biomass generators of the town.

It is known that there are other worlds, that humankind is riddled among the galaxy as a great and noble infection. It is also known that humankind is an old thing now, geriatric, cynical, forgetting itself, but so what? Pontification is for those who can eat.

Her mother dies of cholera since these people are beginning to forget germ theory. Her father descends into drunkenness until the girl is keeping them both alive with her scavenging. She works thanklessly for years, finding just enough to survive, until one evening she pulls something odd from the ground; a bracelet. It is not made of plastic or metal, but is hardly natural either, covered in markings and grooves – a new thing in the world. She places the bracelet on her wrist. She is beset suddenly by voices, songs, a crowd about her who stood long ago where she stands now. They appear human, or human-like at least. They dance often. And they know things, impossible things about the workings of nature that this young girl and her father, and the rest of her race, do not.

The feeling evaporates, as does the artifact, impossible to retain.

Back home she tells the story to her father, who she is sure will laugh. Instead he says, “Then you found a tear of God.”

She looks out to the colonised stars each night from then on and no longer sees an old and tired empire, the final stages of a wasted life. Rather, humankind is a teenager, she realises – cynical only for not knowing how much it does not know yet.

These people, these others she has felt now, these human-like humans from the long-before, they were real adults, they practised real wisdom. If

they still live, she will find them. If they are extinct, she will learn from what they left behind.

All these wars, all this squalor, all this suffering, it isn't a decline, she decides. It's childhood. A difficult, horrible one, but the trials of a small creature trying to raise itself with no mother or father nonetheless; a feral child, abandoned, lost in the forest, with only itself for company.

She will take the name Gwendolyn, she decides – an ancient term for a blessed ring, in homage to this strange shard of the past she has found in the dirt. She will abandon all else, her father, her world, in pursuit of—

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—waking on my feet once again, dressed. The chronometer reads five more years.

It is night, yet through Bisi's porthole I catch sight of a blue glare in the sky. I hike through the forest and as I approach Imdriso, I see them: ten, fifteen, twenty columns of blue fire, silent and magisterial. I walk among them, knowing there'll be no radiation but still in fearful awe of the power they represent.

The gravitics were meant to drop on Khasala, not Imdriso, and even then I never thought Avarian would actually use them. Clearly Khasala has somehow obtained the secret too and used their cannons on our very own city. This is the way with sticks and children.

Snow is falling now, a by-product of the gravitics leeching heat from the stratosphere. The streets are empty, though I see silhouettes in windows, parents and children cowering, hiding from the awful silence.

Another gravitic column blooms in the distance, out in the rice fields. Perhaps they aren't targeting civilians yet. That would be nice. Still, the gambit is slipping out of my hands. I don't need to consult my ideolabe to know that complete annihilation is a strong possibility. A tragedy, but it will stop the Dumans reaching space at least. In this way I've beaten you, mahayir.

I make through the cobbled streets and towards the forum, the remains of the old launchpad lit by the new blue light of gravitic blasts.

A hooded figure is sitting on a bench in the forum, hands clasped as though awaiting an appointment. They pat a spot beside them.

"Well met," I say. "Shouldn't you be indoors?"

They pat the bench again. I join them.

The hood is pulled back and impossibly, beyond reason, Majister Gwendolyn sits before me.

“How…” I croak, starting up, electrified. “You’re decades dead.”

She acknowledges the diagnosis with a nod. “Then I suppose death agrees with me.”

I yell, “Have you been stalking me this whole time, sabotaging my gambits? Do you know the *years* it took to calculate them?” And then I’m gabbling, screaming, pacing like a lunatic, incensed and yet elated she’s alive at all.

“I want you to stop now,” she says. “The Khasalans can have their rockets.”

“By whose authority?” I say, knowing the College thinks Gwendolyn dead; that they wouldn’t have given the order through her.

She shrugs. “By my authority as your tutor, isn’t that enough?”

“No… Gods, where have you been? Why are you here? What nonsense is this?”

She puts her palms up in an uncharacteristic gesture of peace. “You won’t win this, and I’d like to spare as many casualties as possible.”

“Where have you *been*?”

“Leave them to their rockets now. Take Bisi and fly home. You’ve done enough.”

It comes to me then – my shaking hands, my racing thoughts, the nausea. I say sadly, “This is soup cradle sickness, isn’t it? I’ve been hibernating too much. You’re not here at all. You’re still buried at the College, and here I am in the midst of a psychotic break. Is that it, am I mad?”

She says, “As a general rule I would advise against asking your delusions if you’re deluded, but yes, you’re quite mad. I wouldn’t have taken you on as my student otherwise.”

We watch the snow and the towering blue pillars of gravitic fallout awhile, the dance ever so ominous in its silence; acres of dirt sucked into the air and dispersed, yet without any commotion. Gwendolyn continues, “You are a zealot. I knew this from the day I met you, before even. Your religion is that all things can be calculated and mathematised. Well, look where it’s gotten you.”

“It’s the damn mahayir,” I say. “My gambits would’ve worked if it wasn’t for them.”

“No, they wouldn’t have, not for a second. It’s time to stop.”

“Lecturing me from beyond the grave, how very you of you,” I snap.

“No one’s targeting civilians yet, just empty land to make a point. But they will soon. Do you want millions dead for your cause, Erdo?”

“Billions will die if I let them spread out into Big Sister space, you know that.”

“No, I don’t. You cannot count on humans doing as they’re told. On some level the Dumans sense your pushes and push right back. They’ll flock out to the stars one day anyway, and Big Sister territory will be their first stop.”

“Nonsense, the gambit just needs proper implementing, my sociopoetics are perfect.”

“But people aren’t,” she murmurs. “And they will not be made so. What if everything can’t be represented by number and measure? What if humans are simply too chaotic a system?”

“Then the College and all its projects are doomed.”

“I could’ve told you that for free.”

We sit in tired silence for a while. When I turn to her again, she’s vanished.

Under any other circumstances I would resign my post citing mental abnormalities, but this is too important. After all, when—

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—the next day came we were out of food and almost out of water. Still the hammering insisted through the door as the windows bent with mass tunnellers, our force fields withering. Majisters shouted parsillogy in defence, but again it was no use: *Oh grant me the winged feet to lament the air, and tickle the nose of my enemies with a little shrub of glass.…*

The crashes, the constant gurgling of a plasma cutter through adamite, and forever Majister Gwendolyn watching below for the sign of a behethan or gravity platform.

I was about to tell her this was likely where we parted ways, when two behethans leapt into the air, free of their pens, Illiya and Theodora. They

were met by enforcer automatons and everything became a curtain of fire and artillery.

Illiya went crashing to the floor, exploding the entire east wing of the College, while Theodora climbed vertically like a mad swallow, yawed back towards the ground and came screaming down on the automatons.

“Finish it,” Gwendolyn yelled, gesturing wildly to my literafact.

What was her gambit? For she hadn’t given up, clearly. She assembled a bundle of paper – *her* literafact I supposed – and tied it around her neck. The other majisters did the same.

The death knell of the sociographer; a ritual I had not anticipated.

She took my hand and we stood in silence awhile as though waiting for an appointment with the gods.

“The caretakers,” I said finally.

“What?”

“The arguing caretakers, the first day we met. I asked you to reconcile them and you did. How?”

“Of all that you could ask…”

“Well, what in hells is there to lose now?”

She said sadly, “I spent the afternoon drinking and did nothing, and often nothing is the smartest move.”

“You tricked me…”

“You assumed that reason can overcome the follies of romance. But reason has a limit, whereas stupidity is boundless. They loved each other. They made up.”

The floor began to shake with the stutter of a drill from below. The enforcers were coming up under us, excoriating the rot by any means possible.

Had I any gods to pray to then—

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—the end of the world will be entertaining, at least.

Avarian and I watch the gravitic eddies blooming in the night. Khasala still targets unpopulated areas and we do the same, but this performative pacifism can only last so long.

“*Tragitinide*…” Avarian murmurs, the Duman for *a senseless loss we must simply accept*. As always, the Dumans have not just the right words,

but the exactly-right words.

I look out on the sandstone city, on Imdriso, its alleys and thoroughfares, its markets and libraries.

A city is a mind. It is a long and enduring consciousness written in the language of bricks. If by tomorrow Imdriso is flattened in gravitic desolation, what will have been lost? People of course. Landmarks of course. But *mentality* too, boulevard by boulevard, a concrete brain gone forever.

I think the universe must be like this for whoever is looking down on Her; the unfolding of one great aeon-long sentence, with the fundamental forces as verbs, with particles for nouns. The cosmos as a literafact.

“I believe you are a curse,” Avarian says. “A curse from the stars.”

I say, “In fact, I am trying to stop you cursing the stars. If you would only do as I tell you, you would all be left alone.”

There’s no point trying to guarantee his behaviour with parsillogy now; for whatever reason it simply does not work. It seems the mahayir has gotten to everyone.

With the horror of the sight before us, all respect has fallen out of his voice. Losing a war is not defeat; beginning one is.

He says tiredly, “Of all the things you deny us access to, it isn’t weapons or knowledge, but *exploration*?”

“There is a great plan to it all. I’m afraid you’ll just have to trust me.”

“You keep a knife to my throat at all times. There is no opportunity for trust.”

I pour us two rakias from his booze cabinet and we watch the apocalypse with refreshments. I put a brotherly hand on his shoulder. “First Minister of Imdriso, I deny you a great adventure so we can all keep our perfect gardens. Perhaps ten thousand years from now we might trust you enough to allow you your wings. But that millennium is not this one. Forgive me.”

He gives a little nod, his eyes wet. “Yes, fine,” he says. “There is one last thing I should be honest regarding then.”

From his pocket he takes a small gemstone. It is the colour of sororite, a Big Sister hue that should be impossible in this universe: a goldish-bluey-red. Sublimia hits me at once, but I quickly turn my attention to my breathing and keep the monster down.

“Is this the last of the contraband?” I say.

He nods and says quietly to himself, “*Pobedensum.*”

Pobeden – to destroy, to vanquish, to be exempt from mercy and deprived of allies. Or to translate the word as he means it: *I am completely defeated without recovery.*

Tomorrow or the day after when I am back in orbit and this ridiculous debacle is behind me, I will hurl the gemstone out of Bisi’s airlock and into cold space as a final celebration. It will be a modest and perfect victory.

“Target Khasala’s hydrogen plants,” I say. “Take them all out. If they continue striking us after that, begin on the population centres.”

His eyes widen a little. “We have agreed with their ambassadors to only target each other’s agricultural sites.”

“And yet still their rockets launch. Was I unclear in my speech?”

He goes to argue, to cry out, but stops himself, knowing full well it is pointless.

“Their hydrogen plants,” I say.

“Their hydrogen plants,” he agrees in a murmur.

I bow to him as his high standing deserves. He pretends not to see and continues looking out on the city.

An hour later we watch not just gravitic blue on the horizon but great orange explosions, hydrogen blooming refulgently into the evening, and all the death that accompanies it.

When love is gone, there’s always reason. And when reason is gone, there’s always fire. The end isn’t far away now.

Avarian begins quoting some dull Duman playwright. I am too tired to listen. Besides, it feels as though a terrible pressure is trying to push out through my skull. Perhaps it is all the soup cradle sleeps catching up with me. I go looking for a sink to wash the fatigue off.

A soldier is in the toilet tying his laces. He scurries out when he catches sight of me.

I run the water and submerge my face so there’s only the silence and the cold. My hand was forced, I think to myself. This infernal mahayir, the blood belongs to them, not me.

It is nothing but sociomathematics. It is nothing but an equation balancing and rebalancing, inevitable as the setting sun or receding tides; behavioural mathematics.

“But we are not mathematics,” Gwendolyn says in my mind. I start back with a shriek. She continues: “And the second we give into believing we *are*, that is the moment we forfeit control to those who would sooner see ten thousand people dead than a few hundred boots go unproduced next financial quarter. You are very silly in this way.”

I say, “And you are very dead. Won’t you shut up?”

Only there she is, standing in the reflection of the mirror, leaning over my shoulder as though she were real.

The ceiling shakes. Khasala has begun dropping gravitics on the centre of Imdriso, it seems.

I watch her through the falling dust, through the careening particles of entropy I conjured.

“It’s the language, silly gosling,” she says. “It’s the scalpel tongue.”

“Oh gods, what?”

“The finger that points. Only, in Duma’s case, they speak such a specific language that there’s almost no gap between the representation and the thing represented. *Lafasala* for water – isn’t that the exact sound of water? *Fumatrist* for the first dance with a lover. Isn’t that just the shape of it? You can’t lie to these people, you can’t bend them, because their language allows no room for lies.”

I laugh almost manically. As delusions go, this is an elaborate one, I’ll give it that – clearly the soup cradle sickness hasn’t dampened my imagination.

“Don’t you have anyone else to harass from beyond the grave?” I ask.

“It’s the old tongue,” she insists. “These people speak the language of the Big Sisters. Perhaps they’re descended from them.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Think on it please, a delusion as I may or may not be.”

The ceiling shakes again, a nearer explosion this time. “I did this,” I say. “With *my* language, not theirs.”

She says, “Yet they know theirs better than you do yours, since inwardly the only tongue you speak is power.”

“If power works, if it protects, then I see no harm. Everything is functions and probabilities, even minds, even hearts. The last science will be mathematics.”

“But the first technology was language.”

I smack my head, pull my hair. “Out! Hells, out with you. You’re decades dead, you crone, you ghost…”

She peers at me with serious, entreating eyes now. “You’ve seen the artifacts, you know what the Big Sisters were capable of.”

“Fine! But they were not gods.”

“Granted. Though, just consider. Consciousness takes place between the desire and the longing to satisfy the desire; between the fear and the arrival of the feared thing. What if the Dumans can’t be deceived because they’re able, at all times, to properly understand what they want and to properly express it to themselves, to others? What if they speak the Big Sister tongue, and that tongue has no ambiguity for a sociographer to exploit? They want to build rockets and that is that. No amount of you telling them otherwise will convince them not to.”

“May I ask who you’re talking to?” Avarian stands at the doorway, covered in dust.

“Thinking aloud,” I say. “What is it?”

“Their hydrogen plants are gone…”

Calculate, recalculate. What would the ideolabe say to all this? There’s no point consulting it, not with the mahayir out there somewhere.

The endgame is clear. Wipe out their gravitic launchers, then destroy the entirety of Khasala – reduce everything to blue mist. When the ashes have settled, flowers will bloom anew.

I open my mouth to give the order. Only, my mouth does not move. Instinctively I reach for my face, but my hands will not respond either. Instead, totally beyond my control, my voice says, “That’s enough now. Stop the bombardment.”

Avarian raises an eyebrow. “Completely?”

“Completely. No one should die over this.”

I am screaming out inside but impotent. He seems sceptical of this sudden change of heart, though relieved. He cocks his head in confusion. My head nods back in reply.

He climbs the stairs and my agency returns instantly.

“Monster,” I cry at Gwendolyn in the mirror. I see the truth now in her tired eyes; the years of nonsense rambling, the tirades and bizarre hand gestures – they weren’t just affectations. “You’re a literafact,” I say. “You implanted yourself in me with parsillogy, didn’t you?”

“Oh Erdo,” she murmurs.

And I am furious then, at the wasted time on this backwards world, at the scorn the College will pour on me when I return. “Even in death you just can’t stop interfering, can you? This is your legacy? A brain worm, a tick, come back to muddle in everything.” I spit, “Godsdamned mahayir.”

She says gently, “You are the mahayir. There is no evil sociographer come to hijack your gambits, just as there were no traitors at the College all those years ago. Do you understand? There is only these people and their language. You can lie to them, but their language will not allow them to lie to themselves. When this war is over, they will only return to building their rockets because the unknown is what they want.”

Another gravitic blast above. Another violent shaking of the ceiling.

Am I defeated?

Maybe I’m defeated.

Maybe that’s fine.

She bows to me. “Our work is never finished and we’ve only just begun. Irritating as you are, I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” I say, trying not to cry. “I’ve missed you so much.”

She puts a hand on my shoulder. And the hand is warm, real.

I start back, falling into a toilet stall. Perhaps she’s a clone then, implanted with her literafact? Or a twin sister? Or a projection of heavy light somehow?

She raises her palms in peace. “This is all over now.”

“What in hells are you? I saw you die right there in front of me.”

“Won’t you just stop fighting?”

I take up the posture she taught me all those decades back, right foot in front, left hand on the heart.

“Oh don’t…” she murmurs. But I am over the cliff already.

I shout, “Amid the marmalade morning the photons cry for God.”

And she reluctantly retorts, “The age thinks better of a gilded fool than of a threadbare saint in wisdom’s school…”

It’s a good parry, typically pompous of her. Again her hands entreat surrender. She says, “Let go now. It’s over.”

I say, “Two mirrors in the mountain mist, the dew long gone to summer’s tryst.”

And she counters, “One maddens at the motor, but what makes it go…”

The jab was useless. She brushes it off completely.

I attack: “First where the panther dallied, gormless under the snow!”

She defends: “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me…”

I feel the ribbons of her words and influence slipping tight around my mentality; a linguistic gambit, an entrapment.

I yell, “Three quarks for Mr Mark, sure hasn’t got much of a bark!”

She mumbles, “And sure any he has it’s all beside the mark…” Then she wraps her robe about herself, and says without any urgency from behind her grey and tangled explosions of hair: “To make the perfect cocktail though, do you know the ingredients?”

Trying to stay sane, to keep her out, I babble, “And would it blur the Christmas glee, my stocking hang too high, for any Santa Claus to reach, the altitude of—”

“Three parts gin,” she says delicately. “Two parts orange juice.” She raises a finger, looks directly into my soul, whispers, “And one part melon.”

The knot is pulled in perfect constriction, a mental trap she built for me decades ago now exploding shut.

And I am fading, faded, and unbecome.

*

My first sense is of a mouth that tastes like death. It must have been a big sleep this time, decades. I hear Bisi’s purr beneath my feet. Then through blurry eyes I spot Gwendolyn leaning against a porthole.

I say, “How long did you put me in the soup cradle?”

“Twenty years for both of us. Sorry about knocking you out, but you were getting a little uppity. Couldn’t jeopardise everything at the last moment.”

The floor tilts under me. We’re flying, I realise. “Where in hells are we going?” I say.

“Oh, up I suppose.”

I ready the worst parsillogical barbs I can muster, but she only beckons me over to the window. “Don’t be a violent bore. You won, Erdo. And so did I.”

We’re high in the stratosphere, water vapour kissing Bisi’s wingtips. And flying at her side is another behethan, tiny, a child. “Where did that come from?”

But the child speaks for itself. Bisi wasn't cantankerous all this time; she was pregnant.

Gwendolyn says, "A little girl. We'll let the mother name her, of course."

"Behethans don't give each other names…" I say. As though listening, as though in protest, Bisi lets out a gurgling fanfare.

My face is wet and when I go to dry it, I notice my eyes are leaking. I say, "But I don't understand. If you're a literafact, how are you doing all of this? How can you know things I don't know yet?"

She offers her hand and I take it. Ever so kindly she says, "That last day in the Theoretics Tower, the enforcers broke in. There was a scuffle and they blew several majisters down like dogs. They executed a few more publicly and the rest of us were exiled." She kisses my forehead, for hello, for welcome. "You don't remember my death because, much to the chagrin of many, it hasn't happened yet. Yours has, right there in the tower with a shot to the chest. I'm not the literafact, Erdo. You are."

My hands look like my hands. My tongue sits in what feels like my mouth. I look to her with nothing but despair. She says, "You were missed, silly gosling. Years after your burial, I couldn't help it, I read you back into being. You've been my mental passenger ever since."

"But I remember everything," I say. "*Your* death, *your* burial, my assignment here…" The mind trying to take back control of the mind, even as it slips forever beyond servitude.

"*Do* you remember?" she asks, that tutorial tone returned in her voice. "Or do you only want to remember? Could it be that when one awakes in a dream, they desperately invent a narrative to give all the chaos a shape?"

I look back into that long corridor, the years before. I remember the enforcers hammering on the door. I remember the force fields flickering. The rest is shapes in mist, faces in clouds, a story of a story.

"Oh gods," I whisper.

"No," she says. "Just you and I."

The little behethan hoots and whistles, flips end over end, nothing but fun.

"Then what was I in all of this?"

"My student, as ever," she says. "I first heard about Duma when I was a young majister, stories of a people who spoke a language that bridged the gap between the representation and the thing represented. I knew it would

mean the end of sociography if true. Deception and manipulation would be impossible, the sociographer having no linguistic gap to exploit to peddle their lies – worlds could no longer be socially controlled, providing they learned the language. The Big Sister territory restriction would collapse. But I would need to test the theory, and that would require a zealot, someone incapable of backing down in their attempt to bend the Dumans. You seemed so fascinated with the College's obsession for galactic order. I knew from the first day I met you that you'd be the perfect candidate. Only, I thought we would come here together one day as equals. Not with you riding inside me as a ghost."

"But the years here on Duma, I remember them."

"Of course. I gave you my body when I could, let you strut about in it with your schemes. You're a little lax about personal grooming, I must say."

"Then you had no gambit…" I say, dangerously close to accepting all of this.

"None. Nor was there a mahayir. I only let you try to enforce your will, and how much harder they pushed back for that. It's as I thought. These people are the descendants of the proto-Big Sisters, those who stayed behind for some reason. The Dumans won't be controlled because they speak the tongue of their wise ancestors, a language incapable of distortion. And soon we'll teach it to everyone."

I see myself in Bisi's porthole now, an old woman, with my soul as nothing but a projection. "I'm a terrible failure…" I say. "Just living inside your mind."

"Rent free. And quite the opposite of a failure, thank you. I suggest we consider this your final exam, and a decent pass at that."

She moves aside and invites me up to the porthole properly. The sky is full of great objects, behethans I realise, hundreds, thousands of them, all flying loosely alongside us, climbing into the upper atmosphere.

Gwendolyn says, "Curious little behethan tradition, do you remember?"

I say, "When there's a new baby in the world, everyone likes to drop by to say hello. You planned this too? – you knew Bisi was pregnant and the child would summon its extended family?"

"I hoped it might shake out that way, certainly. Do you know, each one is full of humans, eager Duman pioneers, thousands of them, Imdrisans, Khasalans, the war over and the party just beginning."

They’re soaring out of the atmosphere, we alongside them, a twisting, fluttering convocation of space-bound dragons. “Where are you all going?” I say.

“The behethans will take us to the nearest star system in Big Sister space, then we’re on our own. We’re going to meet our old siblings if they’ll have us, or explore what they left behind at least.”

“But sublimia…” I murmur.

“If it’s real then we’ll feel it, just as with grief, just as with sorrow, then we’ll see it doesn’t kill us and we’ll be stronger for that. It’s going to be fine, but it’s going to be different. Come along with us.”

“Do I have a choice in refusing?” I ask.

“As much as any other character in any other story.”

“None then?”

“None then.” She puts her hand on my shoulder, which I suppose is her shoulder. “The awful feeling in you, the sense that a whole series of unexpected events are about to take place – that isn’t sublimia or anxiety or a mental aberration. That’s life. That’s what living feels like. That’s spite and hope and longing in your veins just as nature intended. I don’t know where we’ll be tomorrow, but we’re on our way. Wouldn’t you like to come?”

I shrug, which I suppose she takes as a yes because our course remains the same, pointed up beyond sociomathematics and into pure chaos, where perhaps all things originate anyway.

She pours us both wine. We drink and watch to see what happens next.

The future comes for us soon enough. We break through the atmosphere, the sky falling black.

To the west are the stars of the Symposium.

To the east is the deep dark of the void.

And dead ahead, in that forbidden zone of space, I do not know those stars’ names, but I suppose they will find names shortly; just like this baby behethan, just like all the new things we will recoil from, until we learn to stop recoiling and become the change we once were so afraid of.

We leave this pock-marked world below and the other worlds behind; all the fumbles and mistaken confidences, all the tried-our-hardests and couldn’t anyways, bound now for the big maybe, the middling what ifs, and the very little, but very real comfort that all our questions might not have answers, but at least we’ve found the courage to ask them aloud now.

The Top Legs Hypothesis

It was on the fifth cycle of the blue quaternion that Radiadeseslavichka – Radi to her friends and podmates – was to receive the mouse. She waited on the lip of the nebula, heart in her dorsals, watching the craft approach.

You won't mistreat it, will you? came a wave of ultraviolet from behind: her second podfather.

Mistreat it? Radi said. She'd been waiting half a century for this day, living in wild excitement at least half that time. Plus she'd learned everything she could about mouse biology, from their dietary needs to their optimal environment. She'd built a whole pressurised *palace* for the little thing! No, she would not 'mistreat' it.

Only, her podfather said, *they are small and breakable, and…* He paused gravely. *They do not live so very long. Don't get attached. And don't try too hard to train it. And don't—*

Secondfather, please, Radi replied in a burst of gamma. *I know what I'm doing.*

He ceased in his nagging and the two of them watched the little craft pause at the edge of the nebula. Radi unfurled her vacuum fins in a way she hoped would seem inviting and led the craft into the mists. Cautiously the craft followed through the plumes and eddies of hydrogen, finally reaching where Radi had intended, the enclosure. One-fifth oxygen, four-fifths nitrogen; she knew mice preferred it that way.

The craft entered the atmosphere field and Radi helpfully disassembled it so the mouse could get free. The mouse seemed very excited at this and suddenly bounced about the enclosure like it had been electrocuted. Radi extended her fins and turned crimson red as behethans did to calm their children, but this did not seem to calm the mouse at all.

She tried shaking the enclosure a little. The mouse seemed rather upset at that also.

It took Triblium all of his strength not to fall down on his butt. He cried out, "Oh gods, are you trying to kill me?" But the creature just looked on with…

What? How *did* behethans show emotions anyway?

Oh, he realised. This is punishment. They are still angry with us, as they should be.

He put up his hands in surrender. The tremors ceased finally.

What now?

He'd spent months preparing for the expedition, but most of that had concerned the journey. So little was understood about behethan culture that no one had known *how* to train him for a proper encounter. He bowed shakily. "Triblium," he said, hoping the creature could hear him. "I am a scientist. As are you, I think."

It looks like a child's toy, Radi thought. *The round bit on top, then the four long bits around the middle.*

What a strange design.

She remembered something then, what her second podfather had told her about these creatures, that they experienced only one happening. Their minds were too small to live in phasespace, perhaps they didn't even know it was there, and so when something happened it was the only way it *could* have happened.

Earlier, she'd watched the craft approaching the nebula in twenty slightly different iterations: one where it was a spheroid, one where it was late, one where the mouse had died during the voyage. And so it must all be very frightening for this little animal, she realised, to live in a universe where things simply happen to you, one's life as a leaf in the wind.

She looked into phasespace now and saw the branching what ifs, and relaxed into them as she always so enjoyed, the halls of all possible becoming.

"Triblium," he said again, pointing to himself. The behethan was perfectly motionless.

Yes, clearly bad blood.

He said, "I should like to apologise for…what we did to your ancestors, for how we treated you, used you. We didn't know you are intelligent, you see." A minute passed. Then ten.

He drank his water rations, finished a survival meal. Still nothing.

The creature despised him. That much was evident.

Two hours.

Twelve hours.

He began to grow desperate, the behethan just *hanging* there, watching.

Twenty-four hours. Fifty. The oxygen in the enclosure dwindled until he was light-headed and weak.

Two, four, eight, sixteen universes away, Radi played. In one universe the mouse was female. In another, Radi had never been born.

It was customary that adults past perhaps a thousand years of age learned to live primarily in the world of *really is*, but Radi and her young friends of merely three or four hundred couldn't resist the what ifs next door.

She was blissfully lost, but finally something in the primary universe caught her attention: the mouse seemed to be motionless on its back now. She wondered how long had passed.

There, you've almost killed it, Second Podfather said, floating nearby.

Radi said, *I was just away for a little while.*

Her podfather sighed. *This is not the creature's natural habitat. You must stay here with it, in* this *now.*

The mouse was only on the door of death it turned out, not quite over the line, and her podfather filled the enclosure with water and oxygen, and the mouse became animated once again. Then her podfather brought a little communication machine from the long-before and placed it in the enclosure.

I must be careful, Radi thought, even now feeling herself pulled into all the parallel what ifs, all her split selves; then trying with such an effort of will she'd never known to stay *here*, with *this* little mouse before her.

"Dear gods," Triblium yelled. Had he been dead? He remembered suffocating.

There was no doubt now. He was being punished on behalf of the entire human community for crimes against behethans. Many had said this would happen if he came. After all, why *had* the behethans agreed to the exchange? What did they need from *people*? They possessed ample resources. They were militarily strong. They lived in the vacuum for hells' sake. And they were millennia ahead of human technology. It was clear now why they had accepted. To torture him, he realised.

He spotted the lightglobe at the edge of the dome. This must be some reminder of the terrible history. It had been used by those who once subjugated behethans, he knew; light commands fired right into their retinas, but there was no other known way to communicate. He paired the globe with his synaptic net, thought hard, and it began to flash in staccato pulses, such that he hoped some meaning would be replicated in the creature's mind. "First matter," he thought. "I am sorry, I am so sorry for what we did to you."

Sorry? Radi was confused. Apologies were alien to a species who saw many world lines simultaneously – one was both at fault and not at fault at the very same time.

Historical point, Second Podfather explained, watching in concern. *We let them believe we were stupid creatures once.*

Why? Radi said.

To see when they would mature enough to treat us kindly.

Why didn't we tell them what we really are? she asked. *They would've been pleasant to us then, surely.*

Second Podfather said, *Someone who behaves well only because they fear punishment from above is not a good person. They are a scared person. And they would just as soon do the wrong thing if threatened into that instead. Tell him you accept his apology.*

Hm, Radi grumbled. She said back to Triblium in light, *We forgive, that is fine.* She saw in her mind fifty other Radis all performing this strange ceremony for fifty mice before them.

What? Triblium thought. Do I get to live then?

It was true he would live anyway. Back in the Symposium a mindstate of his was stored as a crystallograph, and it could be replicated at any time. But he was one of those old-fashioned oddballs who didn't believe that to be immortality, more an identical twin. To physical formalists like himself, there was only one life.

With the lightglobe he pulsed carefully, "Then if I am not here to be… punished, may I ask what it is you do in this nebula?"

Oh, they are curious, Radi said, delighted. *You didn't tell me they get curious.*

Of course, Second Podfather said. *They experience many emotions you would recognise.*

Wonderful! she exclaimed. *And are they frumbrent too? Or caricious? Do they cordwaine their oricents when twelfth quaternion comes?*

Slowly there, little one, her podfather said. *Their minds are not as large as ours. And look, time has passed, you're harming it again.*

Sure enough the mouse was at the edge of the enclosure waving its… appendages.

What were those things? – the silly little grabbing extensions it flung around, for they must have a name.

She topped up the air in the enclosure once more. Then when the mouse was settled, she said, *You are Top Legs.*

"Triblium," he said.

Top Legs, she insisted.

Apparently defeated, he croaked, "Yes okay." Then: "Listen, not to be rude, but when the oxygen runs out it's very dangerous for humans. Please don't do this again. It hurts me."

You are a special thing in the world, Radi said. *I promise not to repeat the mistake.*

Predicting he might get hungry, next she built some protein folds from the nebula and dropped them in the enclosure. The mouse ate greedily.

Play pleasantly, please, Second Podfather said. *If you kill the creature, it will be extremely difficult to reanimate him, you understand?*

I understand, Radi and twelve of her phasespace sisters replied in unison.

Top Legs, she said, addressing Triblium directly. *I have been informed that you are highly breakable. Is there anything else I should be careful for?*

"Oxygen and food, these things make me happy," he said.

I will remember this, Radi said, ruffling her dorsals in the affirmative. Her phasespace sisters did the same, except for the one who had deviated so badly she was doing endless twirls.

Stop that, Radi said.

"Stop what?" Triblium asked.

My sister, being silly.

"We're alone…"

In this now, yes.

"Right, okay. What?"

And feeling Second Podfather's judgement upon her, the old man thinking her mouse project so misguided, she took hold of the lightglobe link and hoped it was strong enough.

Another behethan appeared alongside Radi. Then another and another until there must have been twenty in all, and *no*, Triblium was sure of it, they were the *same* behethan. He turned to see that alongside himself there were twenty more *him*selves, all staring back in mystified horror so both the Tribliums and Radis appeared as actors in a great drama.

Many, Radi said. *Similar but different, you understand?*

"Uh…" Triblium said.

Possible and real are same. But you live in this *possible and so you say it is real. Actually, they are all real.*

"Possible selves of mine?" Triblium murmured.

Perhaps something was lost in the light pulses because Radi said, *No. Actual everything, all possible worlds are actual, you see them, yes? But we're like…* She did a little backflip, apparently in frustration. *Coral! You are a head of coral asking how it got here, but you could just as well ask how you got there or everywhere else under the sea instead.*

"Yes," Triblium said, excited. "I think I understand. Matter as a wave, the sum over histories, a particle in every point at once. Quantum mechanics, it's an ancient human science. You see parallel universes, don't you? Gods, do you live in superposition, before wavefunction collapse?"

No, Radi said. *Not that. Not that at all. Something else.*

"Oh," Triblium sighed, as did his brothers who then promptly vanished. "I thought it was that."

It's not that.

"All right."

A long silence.

Diplomatically, Triblium added, "Well, you are the most interesting species I've ever met. I hope you don't mind me saying so."

Hm, Radi said.

"And," he continued, trying to fill the awful quiet, "if I was being technical, I suppose I'd say you're the most interesting *humans* I've ever met, since the current theory is that behethans were humans once, you know. Though I admit there's some disagreement regarding whether

humans all evolved on the same planet, wherever that might've been, but when it comes to my personal opinion—"

This is boring. We go, Radi said suddenly.

She grew a tentacle and wrapped it about his enclosure and dragged him deeper into the nebula.

She listened for the mental music of her kin, of her family and friends of the mists, the chatter of gamma wave thoughts and infrared notions as calves and elders alike corresponded and bickered and courted: I love you, I dislike you, I want to know everything, my wollovan hurts.

As they flew, she began to lose herself again or find herself again depending on one's perspective, her fifty phasespace sisters swimming alongside, as well as those sisters who remained at the lip of the nebula, and others who had died of some freakish disease in the last day; they were her kin also.

She glanced back at the mouse. She pitied it, with only itself and its single mind for company. Ghastly.

How do they fly like that? Triblium wondered. We never did learn the secret of their propulsion. Or anything actually, if they have brains or kidneys or spleens, and we can hardly ask – surely they'd never tell us a damn thing now after the way we hurt them. It's incredible they let me in here at all. Why *did* they pretend to be animals all that time? And what miraculous technology are they sitting on?

He would wait until he was alone, if she ever did leave him alone; then he could explore, investigate – get to the bottom of all this.

Nervously, he rubbed the tiny pellet at the base of his neck, the Symposium listener; the all-seeing eye, reporting all it saw and heard back to the hub even now. Well, even if these creatures turned on him, at least this strange outing wouldn't have been for nothing.

He watched shapes in the nebula mist, other behethans surely, great asymmetrical bulks the size of twenty-storey buildings poking from the purple froth. There must be thousands of them here, he thought, millions, all working on some project or other, casting hydrogen in great helices and pyramids, equations perhaps, or art, or fun.

How is my counterpart? he wondered – the behethan scientist sent out to live in the human realm, the other side of this exchange. It's good, he

reflected, that at least there's the veneer of cooperation between our two species, with this slow step out into Big Sister space, bringing us all closer together in some sense. An adventure.

When the exodus began four hundred years back, naturally the humans were drawn to the Big Sister planets, with ruins everywhere and answers nowhere. Naturally the behethans were drawn to the nebulae, where they preferred to live anyway. This nebula in particular, all sorts of bizarre readings had been detected from nearby; meson bursts, gravity ripples, perhaps produced by technology even beyond what behethans were capable of. And now Triblium saw from his readings that those anomalies were only growing stronger; that he and his behethan friend must be close to whatever was producing them.

Radi dragged them through a connecting vestibule of hydrogen mist, and suddenly there ahead was a sphere of perfect dark. Involuntarily Triblium thought through the lightglobe: "The gods' nipples… What is that?"

Machine, Radi replied. *Old machine.*

"Big Sister machine?"

Radi twirled in the affirmative.

It was his first time close to anything so mystical, *holy* he might even say.

Behethans were one thing, but the Big Sisters? Those who'd known all and seen all, had stepped so far out into the wild shoals of being…

Watching the machine, he felt his mind coming apart with sublimia. "Don't fall in…" the instructors had warned him. "The moth can't stop banging its head on the lightbulb. As a human, presented with technology far enough in advance of your own, you will never cease trying to think into and around it, but you can't. Accept that it is beyond you. This is the only way to retain your sanity."

Radi spied the mouse staring at the huge spherical void. She said, *This fascinates you. Why?*

"Because it was made by the clever ones, the old ones."

But why is that *fascinating? They were just another species. Like humans. Like behethans.*

"Because of the myths," the mouse said, waving his arms. "They were the only offshoot of humanity who truly *got it*, who stepped out of the river of clinging, who shrugged off suffering and made good on all the old

broken promises of salvation and enlightenment; they truly knew who was who and what was what, and how everything got here and where it is all going. They spoke the True language and practised the True science. Perhaps they courted infinity. And on top of that, to know they started as *us* and went off in some other direction, doesn't that mean we can follow them? They are hope. For all of us, they are limitless hope. Do you understand? Do you understand why it is so important that we rediscover what they knew?"

No, Radi said. *Not understand. They were beings. We are beings.*

The mouse slouched in defeat. He pointed to the great void and said, "Big Sister machine does what, please?"

Make.

"Make what?"

No, she shivered, frustrated. *Make, you understand?*

"N…no, I don't understand."

He doesn't comprehend, murmured Second Podfather, eavesdropping. *He never will.*

But one should never tell a teenager a thing is impossible unless they truly wish it to happen, for Radi and her infinite sisters alongside were filled suddenly with the desire to prove *precisely* the opposite.

Mentally, Radi activated the void machine.

For a moment the dark sphere seemed to grow even darker yet, until it wasn't the black of space but simply the absence of everything. Then there was a burst of light, an intermission, and dark again.

A few pieces of the mouse's equipment exploded. "What was *that?*" he whispered.

While Radi understood the question, she had no way to explain in terms his tiny brain would understand.

But *no,* she would not let Second Podfather be right; he could lick his own interstitium for all she cared. And so she danced, as was the behethan custom when there was something to be said which there were no words for: a little to the left, a little to the right, a double triple backflip with your bottom out of sight.

"What did we just watch? What did the machine do?" Triblium asked.

Toys, see your toys, Radi said.

Toys? Triblium thought. Is that the right translation? Oh, she means my equipment. “Well, sure, but—” He checked the readouts on the modularscope; nothing that hadn’t been detected already from outside the nebula, only higher in intensity of course – a huge gamma burst, gravity ripples, and…now wait. It wasn’t *like* the readings from outside the nebula. Rather they were identical, down to the noise of single particles.

How was that possible? Nothing, *nothing* could be replicated twice in the universe, not perfectly. There was chaos and entropy, sunlight and death, and they presented uniquely on each occasion.

“Same,” he thought loudly through the lightglobe, shaking the modularscope at Radi. “Same, same, same!”

Yes, Radi said back. *Of course.*

You see? her podfather said. *He doesn’t understand.*

Impudent in the way only a young person in their fourth century could be, Radi uttered the worst insult a behethan was capable of: *Stick your flippers up your umbilicus.*

Triblium turned back to the machine, back to the void. Sublimia descended on him again, stronger this time, the awful sense that he was staring at something beyond all possible comprehension and it would doubtless melt his mind.

There is a protective shell around the truth called terror, his wisdom said. And those who linger in its folds do not enjoy the luxury of sanity.

He fingered the little listening device in his neck again. Surely it recorded in all wavelengths; gods only knew the miracles it was transmitting back to the Symposium.

“Radi,” the mouse said. “Your scientists, they use…*toy*s like I use toys, to study the Big Sister machine? They have meters, instruments?”

Sometimes.

“Have those toys helped with finding out what the Big Sister machine is for?”

Careful, Second Podfather said. *Do not reveal too much. They are wild and dangerous animals…*

Radi answered at last, *We do not exactly know what the Big Sister machine is for* – which was not a lie, technically.

“Then what do you *think* it is for, please?”

Impulsively and largely to shut him up, she grew a tentacle again and wrapped it about his enclosure, dragging him more leisurely this time through the corridors of purple mist.

“Please,” Triblium said. “The machine.”

We have finished talking about the machine, Radi reported.

“I see,” he said, and stared with wide eyes at the great structures and bulks they passed; the slow commotion of giants in space. He said, “Sorry, are you my…guard?”

Companion.

“Why was that job given to you?”

Oh, I am curious about mice. I study you extensively – you live on spheres and when you’re sad your looking balls leak, ha! – such strange. And because I am so curious about you, when an exchange was agreed, Second Podfather gave you to me as a…

She paused.

“Pet,” Triblium said.

Animal friend, she corrected.

Glancing around his enclosure he thought: And such have you built this pet a cage.

Radi said, *You need rest now I think, Top Legs?*

“Ideally. But my name is Triblium, not Top Legs.”

You have legs on top, you are Top Legs.

“Those are my arms.”

They are your legs but upwards.

And you all look like whales…Triblium thought, imagining one but without meaning to make the thought public, then wincing when he realised he had; the damned neural link. “Like lovely whales,” he corrected himself. “Like…science whales?”

Tenuous aquatic comparison but acceptable designation, she agreed.

“Do you know about whales? Have you ever been to a sphere like the sort humans live on?”

Once when I was little, born there but hardly remember. My mother spent much time on one though, first exodus world.

“Not Duma, surely?”

Yes Duma, surely.

But of course. They couldn't have just paired him with a nobody – trust his fortune to be at the mercy of the daughter of the most famous behethan in modern history, Bisi.

"And is your mother here perhaps, in the nebula?"

No, she does science things elsewhere. See each other often though, just a century ago.

"A century is a long time, Radi." Expressionless, silent, she seemed either to think that over or ignore it completely. "Still, we'll go back to the machine tomorrow, Science Whale?"

Yes, Top Legs. Go back.

He marvelled up at this creature, suddenly dreading that his departure was only weeks away. Then back to his desk in the Symposium, a mouse amongst mice once again, with no Big Sister miracles nor science whales to study. Still, he would be welcomed home a hero, even if the price of that heroism was espionage.

*

Hours later, Radi returned from her reverie among the many possible worlds and watched Top Legs sleeping. Behethans rested once a quarter-century, and even then only with half the brain at a time. It was strange to her that mice required so much sleep. Perhaps they were constantly very stressed.

Carefully she refashioned his habitat, added tunnels and couches, decorations, and hoped it suited his preferences.

Yes, she thought. *I shall fill this place with the things that mice need. But what* does *a mouse need?*

Water, yes mice enjoy that.

Food and oxygen, those too.

But the beyond, *this one longs for the* infinite *I think; wants to reach out and grace one of its little paws on the face of the Wonderful What Next.*

Sure enough, when Triblium woke some hours later, that was the first thing he asked after: the Big Sister machine.

They returned to it and he examined the device for hours. Radi taught him to activate the void with just a thought, the way human neuralisis technology worked, but without being linked to anything, almost like telekinesis.

He ran the machine cycle over and over, always with the same result in the void: a little flash, a little death, then dark.

“What is happening in there?” he would ask.

And as though teasing him, Radi would always reply: *Make.*

As the weeks went on, each morning when the mouse woke, Radi filled his enclosure with sustenance, turned away while he excreted (despite the fact that she could see in all directions), and they’d wander back to the machine.

Triblium had confirmed only a few facts: it used no circuits or switches or valves, could not be damaged, and for about a thousandth of a nanosecond generated more energy than the entirety of human galactic civilisation had used in its eight hundred thousand years among the stars.

It was one morning while he sat puzzling over his calculations that he looked up and said, “The machine isn’t generating energy from anywhere. I thought it was being borrowed from higher dimensional space or something, but no. It’s almost as though it’s creating a perfect absence and energy is emerging out of *that*. How is such a thing possible?”

Radi said, *Like this?*

Using the mist of the nebula she drew him the equations and formulae he would’ve found by himself in a few days anyway.

The mouse almost fell over. Then finally he did, lying on the ground babbling. There was only one symbol in the main equation he did not recognise, but by inference he knew exactly what it meant. *Nihil*, he called it spontaneously; the variable representing a perfect, total void – no particles, no space, no time, pure anti-thing. He understood then. The machine itself was proof that when a complete absence is maintained, free of any classical or quantum phenomena, even for a very short period, energy is spontaneously generated within it.

His whole body prickled with goosebumps at the thought he was the only human to have ever seen or known such a thing.

Pointing frantically to Radi’s equation he said, “How did you work this out?”

Good science guess, Radi said.

You told him, Second Podfather murmured. *How dull.*

*Not **told him**,* Radi snapped back. *I gave him some hints, he worked most of the rest out himself. They like mysteries, one of their favourite things. Look how happy he is.*

Triblium became obsessive as the days passed. All this stagnation in physics for centuries, arguably millennia, but now things would be different.

It was as he suspected: the laws of nature were just descriptions. They could be subverted. And the Big Sisters had learned to do exactly that.

He didn't sleep much now, Radi noticed. This was strange because mice liked sleep almost as much as they liked mysteries. She'd thought the mystery of the machine would invigorate him, lengthen his short lifespan maybe, but he seemed only to be growing singular in his interests, eating less, fretting more.

She expanded his enclosure again, added a library and a steam bath fashioned straight from nebula gas, but the mouse barely used them. All day he sat at his little desk poring over the equation she had given him.

Now Radi saw the benefit and curse of human meaning all at once. For it was by chasing meaning that mice had gotten out to the stars, but it was their being haunted by the promise of more of it that kept them from uniting *among* the stars. They looked everywhere for salvation, yet could never accept the answer was each other.

It was in his last week among the behethans that Triblium grew desperate. He still had no answers. Why were the single particles generated by the machine so unstable? They seemed to just evaporate, but that defied thermodynamics even more than them coming into existence from nothing. And gods, why weren't the behethans *curious*? They watched his grasping and calculating, sometimes gathered about him in quiet bunches, but only conferred amongst themselves a little and moved on. This machine was *holy* technology, hells damnit – some piece of the divine inscrutable.

When it was finally time for him to leave, the human-behethan exchange programme at an end, Radi reconstructed his primitive craft and swam him out to the edge of the nebula; through the soma fields, the solitudinal wisps, the sagacious eddies, close to the edge of the hydrogen lip, where space would begin once again. Triblium missed his enclosure already, so used to it had he become. His old ship felt oppressive, almost a coffin. But he was not so upset. He would return to the Symposium a hero and devise a whole new branch of mathematics to describe the process of drawing energy from

nothing: *nihilistics*. Hells, with everything his little listening device had been sending back to the Symposium, perhaps they'd started already.

The accolades, the titles, perhaps even the offered hands of marriage, yes, Triblium liked the sound of all that. But nothing was as alluring as being enshrined in history and that much was guaranteed for him.

Almost at the lip of the nebula where they would part, Triblium said, "Your culture is a strange one, a fascinating one, and what you've shown me of the Big Sister machine, well, it will change everything."

How? Radi the behethan asked.

So naive, Triblium thought. Children of such power, but still children. "Because this proves that energy can be created from nothing at all. Which means we need never worry about energy again. We're closer to some great explanation of everything."

All twenty-five of Radi's phasespace sisters peered on at all twenty-five of Triblium's phasespace brothers and said nothing. Triblium was about to issue the formal goodbye speech and turn the spacecraft about when he spied a pylon and said, "What's that?"

A science thing, Radi said. *It's no matter.*

"No, it's a detector, and there's another. You're observing the Big Sister machine from this far out?"

In a sense, she said.

"You've had monitoring instruments this whole time? You know *exactly* what the machine does, don't you?"

Lying was still a novel concept to Radi and she tried her hardest, responding with something that mentally corresponded to: *Yes-no*.

"Why in hells didn't you tell me you're doing proper science on it?"

Because mice seem to like solving mysteries.

"You knew what it's for all along," Triblium said. "And since you haven't told any humans on the outside about the machine's energy potential, that means you're keeping it a secret. Which in turn means either you won't let me leave here alive, and I don't think that's the case, or you'll alter my memory."

Just a little change here and there, Radi said. *Nothing you won't miss.*

"Nothing I won't miss?" he exploded. "This is the greatest discovery of my career, this will change the face of physics itself, don't you understand? But you do understand. Because you know what we'll do with it, with infinite energy, with matter from nothing."

Yes, Radi said. *Mice too silly for now. But wasn't it fun to play? You had a nice time, I hope.*

It was the rage of a child within him, hating that one can't have what one wants, yet knowing it's best that it's denied. "But then why did you agree to the exchange programme at all?"

Radi performed a behethan shrug: a double twist and a little shimmy. She said, *Because we would like to be friends with mice one day. This was a good first step.*

There was nothing to add. Defeated, he simply said, "Well, it was indeed fun to play, thank you Radi. Please just treat my memory gently."

I enjoyed it also. And I will.

He bowed to her. She tilted forward in an imitation of bowing in return.

Gods, what would ever matter more than being here?

About to push into space, he said suddenly, "What if you didn't have to make me forget?"

I must. Just a little sequence of sonic pulses, won't hurt, promise.

"No, I mean what if I didn't leave?"

Mm.… Radi did a backflip in consideration. *Until when*?

"Until forever," he said. "Mice don't live so long compared to you. What if I stayed and we studied the machine together? That way I could help, and your secret would never get out. This is the biggest archaeological and scientific find in the galaxy. I can't let it go now…"

But your friends, they look for you. Exchange completed.

"Then tell them I wanted to stay. Or tell them I died. Hells, I won't be missed. They sent me because I'm expendable. Just think about it."

Radi did think about it. She called in gamma back to Second Podfather and Fifth Podmother, who put it to their pods and think-ilks, who chatted to the wise seers and sages who decided, based on the behethan principle of least harm, that if the mouse really wanted to remain then he may remain. But he was Radi's responsibility, and she must feed and water him daily and not let him die by accident.

Acceptable terms, Radi reported.

"Just like that?" Triblium said, amazed.

Like what?

"Human phrase. Look." He shifted uncomfortably, considered for a moment whether these creatures had some buried rage he just hadn't triggered yet. "There is one more matter I should raise."

The purpose of legs on top.

"No, not that." How to even explain? First he would have to introduce her to the idea of hierarchies and special interests. Then politicking and subterfuge and—

You mean your lies? she said.

He tried not to whimper. "Yes, my lies. Radi, I wasn't just sent here as a diplomat, but to spy on you. I didn't want to, it wasn't my initial intention."

Yes, we know, that's fine. Humans are very secretive and silly.

"And there's something else. I'm so sorry, but your secrets will have gotten out already."

Your listening device. Much simple, insignificant.

"But the Symposium…"

No signals leave the nebula. Behethan technology. All is fine.

"Well." The relief, the burden lifted, it was exquisite. "But don't you mind that I deceived you all this time?"

Not if you stop doing it now.

"Then I'll stop doing it now, all right?"

Radi seemed to consider this a moment, then did a small somersault and hummed to herself.

Sensing the limits of human-behethan communication were probably reached, he added only, "Thank you."

Triblium remained through the seventh cycle of apoapsis and the dawn of cosine, a year in his terms, then two, three – his enclosure growing as Radi added more and more extensions: a fountain, a sauna, even an airlock so he could leave the enclosure and explore the nebula from inside an oxygen field. Save for those days when Radi was off on some assignment for Second Podfather, the two of them worked tirelessly together on the Big Sister machine, trying to discern its workings. No wires or crystal circuits of the Symposium of Triblium; no neuronal joins or electron gates of Radi's kind – transcendent.

The mysteries persisted. Why did the machine produce only a single particle? And why was the particle so short-lived? Well, the latter question was easy enough to answer.

Triblium soon discovered that time ran faster the closer one drew to the centre of the void sphere, so that when the particle was created it must be experiencing, *what?* – billions of years in a matter of seconds.

“Temporal dilation,” he murmured when he first saw the readings.

Of course, Radi said.

“You knew about this? Didn’t you think to tell me?”

It was more fun to watch you work it out, she said, not kindly and not unkindly.

“But how can a particle not decay over *billions* of subjective years?”

Radi did a little dance.

Stranger still was that when he studied the reaction with his instruments in slower timeframes, the particle always underwent the same changes: highly energetic at first, then phase-shifting into a new energy state he didn’t recognise, and finally evaporating into apparently nothing.

A new kind of particle perhaps? It must be.

A *radion*, he christened it, for the namesake of his science whale friend.

He was getting older now, but remained grateful in his waning years that he could experience the childhood joy of running through the fields with someone who was having just the same kind of fun as him.

Radi watched the mouse when he was lost in thought or squinting at his notes, almost always knowing what he was thinking but moved by his determination all the same; that something so small and limited would try for a goal so ambitious. He watched her also, usually during those hours when she went perfectly still as though balancing on her tail, her mind who knew where, in universes next door or behind or ahead perhaps, this enigmatic leviathan who had promised to keep him safe and work by his side.

She asked him questions often, of the happenings of humankind. And he answered her as best as he was able, the current theories anyway; that humans were from a single planet (though not everyone seemed to agree), that there had been a great diaspora out to the stars, and such had been the distance that the family lost contact. Then came the thousands of years of forgetting, humans fracturing into self-engineered variations: light-eaters, sky-watchers, the devolutionists, the accelerationists, the piconauts, the lotus eaters – the behethans, let’s not forget – and only relatively recently had the family begun to come together again under the banner of the Symposium, the scientific congress of humankind spreading out into Big Sister space. Such was it now The Year of Careful Adventure.

Radi taught him her people's history in return, that the nebula was home to a pod of behethans nicknamed the Absent Minds, known for their tendency to daydream abnormal amounts even among their species; scientists, theoreticians, and thinkers, sent to the nebula to research the Big Sister machine as much as exiled for their strange tendencies.

It seemed there was a sense of existential leisure to the behethans. Nothing was to be feared – pain would come one day, so what? No one knew what the universe was for, and was that so terrible?

Triblium could not help absorbing a little of that attitude too, simply being, simply swimming in things, and soon it felt quite natural to swim physically too. Before long he was brave enough to leave his enclosure shielded in an oxygen field, powered by little gravity nodules, and do the breaststroke alongside Radi and her podmates, such that all became acquainted with Radi's human and liked him well enough.

So too did Radi grow curious about his way of life, creating a little artificial gravity now and then to experience being pulled down by something as though on a planet, and she could not deny the sensation was pleasant. She tried making words with her mouth, tried to simulate depression, tried to imagine herself not a creature of centuries, but only decades like a mouse, small in not just body but time. And it was then that she truly realised all things in the universe died and could not be made undead, that the nature of everything was to fade, and no amount of ingenuity or desperation to make it not so could make it not so. She did not like this.

Seeming to trust him now, she did not stop Triblium from exploring, from gliding through the corridors of hydrogen and watching all the rituals and happenings that ritually happened there: behethans being born, behethans dancing about one another, 'courting' a human might say, behethans motionlessly gathered in a circle, clearly unwell.

"Science Whale," Triblium said after witnessing that last event.

Top Legs, Radi answered.

"The room where many behethans were sick or injured, are they dying?"

There is a…disease among them, Radi said. *They see Big Sister machine and experience too much strangeness, the mind feels too little.*

"Sublimia syndrome," Triblium said. "Our people suffer the same, when someone encounters transcendence. But how do you treat it?"

We're not sure yet. We find it often affects those who have a strong confidence in knowing how the world works. Sudden destruction of this belief is much bad. They cannot stand to be so small.

It was strange to discover that creatures as wise as these were vulnerable to the same plights as lowly humans.

Radi said, *Do you wonder why you and I don't suffer the disease?*

"I'm too boring, I suppose."

No, it's not that. She somersaulted in thought, ruffled her dorsals. *I think those of us who know that just* being *is transcendent, living inside a brain and body as matter that talks, we face big mystery every day. It's already infinite. What damage can a little* more *infinity do?*

He thought on that and slept on that, knowing something true had been said, but was unable to wrap his mind around it, and when he woke Radi was there again. *Someone to see you,* she said.

Blearily he swam with her past the choral fountains, the fractal baths, and at last to the lip of the nebula where a craft, a human Symposium craft, was waiting.

He was struck by two things looking into the cockpit of the craft – firstly that the pilot was in a state of astonishment, presumably at seeing Triblium swimming like a behethan. And secondly that the face was his own.

Well then, the Symposium had used his backup after all.

"What are you doing outside in the vacuum?" his doppelganger asked, scandalised.

"Swimming is more fun," Triblium said. "Why have they copied me, and why are you even here?"

"There's been no word from you in fifteen years," the doppelganger said, exasperated. "They set me back up in your life, but I got curious. Had to see if you were still around. What are you *doing*? Have you gone native, you idiot? Come home, for hells' sake."

"I like it here."

"What have you found? You look…addled or drugged or something. Are they mistreating you?"

I was once so serious, he realised, staring back at his own face. I spent my entire life in rooms and robes, never knowing what I was missing. Now I study the machinery of the gods and swim with celestial whales.

"What have you *found*?" the doppelganger said again.

I could tell him, Triblium thought. Maybe he'd escape if he was fast enough, take the secret back to the Symposium, build his own version of the machine. And then awards and accolades and hands offered in marriage perhaps. That would sort of be my glory too, by extension.

But no, he examined the face in the cockpit: stern, pragmatic, of life. They had *printed* it from nothing. Gods, from nothing, how awful that he was a token, a reproducible commodity – it was disgusting, it was unsacred; all those memories and worlds within him simply counterfeited, and for *what*?

An idea then – spontaneously generated like the particles in the Big Sister machine, infinitesimally small, then suddenly inflating to infinite volume. He turned about possessed, swimming with all his strength for the heart of the nebula.

"Hey!" his doppelganger cried.

"Remember me," Triblium called. "Or don't. To the hells with all of you."

Back past the fractal baths, the choral fountains, and he exploded into the machine chamber. "I know what it does," he yelled to the behethans in light pulses. "It's not a particle generator, not a geometry modifier or any nonsense like that. Think about it. The machine generates a perfect void and out of that void, energy emerges. Doesn't that sound like something we'd recognise? It's a universe factory. You see? Do all of you see? I've solved your riddle. This is what the Big Sisters wanted to be: gods of their own little cosmos because they knew that nature abhors a vacuum, and so will fill it with instances of creation, miniaturised given the size of the surrounding void, but no less complicated than our own universe. And if I'm right…" he said, speaking directly to Radi now, "then we can confirm it with your sensors. We never thought to watch the process drastically slowed down, by a factor of a billion even. That's something your devices can do, to capture information in such detailed time?"

Of course, Radi said.

Behethans swarmed about the machine for an hour or two, tinkering and modifying, spinning thoughtfully on their tails. Finally they swam back in satisfied shimmies.

Radi activated the Big Sister machine once more.

The explosion they recognised of course, the impossible burst of pure energy, followed by nothing.

Then they watched the recording back in their minds, by light pulses and neuralisis, wildly slowed.

It began as they expected, a firework ten billion degrees hot. Next came gravity, the quantum kind only at this point, piecemeal, non-local, then the forces of nature marshalling, the strong, weak, and electromagnetic interactions emerging.

After that, quarks, hadrons, neutrino decoupling, and suddenly the formation of the first stars and galaxies, the balancing of dark matter and dark energy, then the true birth of the stelliferous era when stars dominated.

A short intermission of no great change elapsed, then look there, craft winding between the solar systems, scout boats, armadas, blankets of carbon nanofibre thin as silk to swaddle the stars, great geometric structures the size of planets being built; numerous species, and each species and being coalescing, uniting – save for patches of stars suddenly vanishing in some misguided war. By the look of it these conflicts were more the exception than the rule, until war seemed to cease entirely, and the galaxies were reorganised: four-dimensional constellations, five-dimensional sculptures ten thousand parsecs wide – intergalactic communities of light and good will. Then formations Triblium did not understand, everything becoming twisting manifolds and hyperspheres, as though nature were the parent and now her children had inherited the house and begun to redecorate, modifying the aesthetics of creation itself, energies and radiations that defied description, stars aligning in artificial configurations as though pulled from inside by great and powerful hands, until the light of things grew brighter and brighter, blindingly so, and the whole scene vanished back into flat nothing.

Triblium and Radi floated in stunned silence for some time.

What does all this mean? Radi said at last.

Triblium replied breathlessly, “That’s why there’s a temporal field, why time accelerates inside the machine. The Big Sisters were studying entire creation cycles. It’s a…zoo, or a nursery, I don’t know, but we can be sure what the thing does now. It’s a cosmos generator.”

They stayed like that for days, for weeks, running the machine over and over. Just by varying the starting conditions of the initial void itself, its size and geometry, they could produce a slightly different universe each time, which would lead to slightly different physics, and later, a few minutes for them, billions of years for the inhabitants, very different forms of life.

Gaseous, memetic, extra-dimensional, but always life, and always life that knew it was life, that felt alone in things and somehow very important in things, convinced it was forever the first at everything. Then as always the universe would give off a last burst of energy and dissolve inexplicably back into the void.

Though Radi and Triblium were omnipotent in a sense, there was one feat they could never seem to manage: the recreation of their *own* universe, with humans and behethans. This led Triblium into a new state of obsession. What if his and Radi's universe had been generated in a similar machine? And what if *that* universe above was being generated in another machine above *it*?

They improvised a new hybrid mathematics, part-human, part-behethan, ordered but ornate, and saw at once there was only one factor that changed in each of their cycles of running the machine: the initial void itself. Its size and configuration must be what was giving rise to so much complexity in the resulting universes. Their early suspicions had been correct. Darkness was the mother of all.

If their own universe had spontaneously arisen from nothingness, then surely when they knew what the shape of *that* void had been, they could potentially recreate the conditions.

Behethan astronomy was far more advanced than its human equivalent. They had mapped the entirety of the cosmic background radiation of the known universe down to the finest details millennia before. Radi and Triblium wound the results back and back, into the first few seconds of the singularity at the beginning of time, then into the nano and picoseconds, before matter had even formed, and everything was energy and chaos. And waiting just before that, at the moment of pure inspiration, they deduced the shape of the void their universe had begun in; the exact geometry of the primordial nothing.

"Now we'll need to build an antenna and a neutrino microscope," Triblium said.

We have antennae, Radi replied.

"Not like this one you don't."

He explained his plan and even Second Podfather seemed vaguely interested.

Through the blue integer, the inverse nonagon, the seasons of the nebula, they worked untiringly. Radi formed mechanical parts directly from nebula

gas as per Triblium's suggestions, and a few of her friends stayed close to help assemble them when they were ready. While they never discussed the exact purpose of the devices, Triblium was beginning to suspect these creatures were smarter than they seemed and had probably cottoned on to his motives already. Several times he caught them claiming ignorance of some mathematical or engineering concept, only to suddenly *remember* when he explained it in full. Am *I* the experiment here, he wondered?

Finally a year or so later the antenna was ready; a gleaming, titanic claw that filled much of the laboratory chamber – a perfect fusion of human and behethan technical prowess.

What now? one of Radi's friends asked.

And while Triblium was sure Radi knew the answer, she deferred politely to her mouse. "We run the next universe cycle," he said. "This time based on the geometry of the initial void of *our* universe."

They did exactly that, with the time dilation effect set very high, so the baby cosmos appeared to develop almost in slow motion compared to its previous appearances.

Energy, quarks, stars, life.

"Now ever so slowly please…" Triblium said.

Someone gave the order mentally and the universe decelerated further. They peered in with the neutrino microscope, hundreds of thousands of years passing in seconds, empires rising, empires falling, mega-structures and funerals.

"Now!" Triblium cried.

Radi brought the slowage to maximum, so the time-rate in the baby universe almost matched their own.

Triblium hunted with the microscope for a few hours, and finally sat back in wild contentment. Before them was a nebula, red and green, perfectly peaceable.

One of the elders said, *But this is…*

"Yes," Triblium murmured. "*Your* nebula, where we are now."

How is this possible?

"We're not looking at a mirror-image of our universe. Rather, we're peering down at ourselves." He turned to Radi knowing that, while they'd never discussed it, she must have worked out what was coming next. "Would you like to?" he asked her. She wiggled her vacuum fins in a gesture Triblium now knew meant, *No, after you*.

He activated their makeshift antenna. He said, “Hi.”

There was a pause, a crackle, then the reply came, a human voice: “Tea and pickled eel.”

The behethans and the human exchanged a glance. “What?” Triblium said.

“You were about to ask me to prove it’s really you you’re talking to. So, tea and pickled eel. Remember that.” He realised quite at once it was his own voice coming back at them.

“This is incredible…” Triblium whispered.

“Wait until you get to where we are.” A behethan’s song rang out from the transmission, Radi’s.

What is happening? a baby behethan whispered.

Us, Radi said. *A little version of us, in there.*

“When…are you?” Triblium asked.

“Ten minutes ahead of you,” the crackly voice replied. “You overshot with the time dilation just a little, but not bad going. Listen, there’s something you need to do.” The alternate Triblium explained that the link was about to die, too much entropic interference, and next they should reverse the modulation of the antenna and make a few energy adjustments to the reactor. “See you when you get here,” the distant voice added, and the connection descended into static.

They marvelled in silence a moment. Then Radi did as the voice had asked, modified their antenna with behethan precision, and activated it again.

There was a hiss and an echo.

“Hi?” came a new distant voice.

With mad certainty on his face then, Triblium said, “Tea and pickled eel.”

“What?”

“You were about to ask me to prove it’s really you you’re talking to. So, tea and pickled eel. Remember that.”

A time loop from another universe.… murmured one of Radi’s friends.

“No,” Triblium said. “It’s the same universe, only the last one was inside ours, whereas we’re inside the one we’re talking to now. They’re just a little behind. From their perspective, they’ve activated their machine and created our universe.”

Sure enough, Triblium's far away voice from a universe beyond theirs said, "This is incredible…"

The conversation went exactly as before, and Radi sang out a greeting, and Triblium explained how to modify the antenna so they could communicate with the universe above *them*. The connection died.

Each universe is identical, stacked inside itself, Radi said reverentially.

"Yes," Triblium said. "It goes down forever, it goes up forever."

Radi accelerated the time dilation mechanism of the baby universe again, and the little nebula before them pulsated with hydrogenic peristalsis, behethans entering and exiting as the years passed, then human craft entered and exited, the blossoming of a friendship perhaps; undeniably their future. A thousand years passed, a hundred thousand, the nebula beginning to die while the stars gyrated and aged about it – a million years, a billion, the constellations sagging and divorcing, the cosmos growing old; one hundred billion years, and all at once that now-familiar energetic sheen came across everything and the baby cosmos grew blindingly white and vanished.

Radi said, *This is a new science. Everything is different now.*

"Yes," Triblium said. "And yet the same as it ever was and will be, in eternal and eternal repeat."

The months became a flurry of mathematics. The years morphed into a reaching attempt to understand how it was possible a universe could be so uniform if one only set the initial conditions correctly. Again and again they ran the same cycle over, talked to their smaller selves, exchanged information and occasionally insults.

Exhausted with obsession then, triumphant in what they believed achievement, they possessed the master equations of *nihilistics*, the ontological formulation of nothing. There was no denying it now. Presented with a void, nature filled it with matter and energy relative to the size and shape of the void itself. Even nothingness couldn't stand to be alone.

Amid the glory of their discovery there was only one last unknown left. They understood how universes began. But why did they all end like that, suddenly raising into light and vanishing?

One day a few decades later, his hair grey, his back bent, his joints cracking and sore, Triblium paused to watch a litter of baby behethans. They were

only seventy years old or so, singing in gamma bursts, waving their dorsals, swishing out into the corridors, exploring.

The answer opened itself like a sunflower in Triblium's mind.

Those vanishing universes, it wasn't heat death. It wasn't a big crunch.

It was adulthood, he realised.

It was distinction.

Some process neither he nor Radi, nor even perhaps the Big Sisters could comprehend was taking place, a technology so far in advance of their own that it *elevated* the whole of space and time for those creatures inside; ascended them to a new realm of physics. They lifted themselves out of the condition of materiality.

He stooped before the machine trying to hold the weight of it in his mind. Universes had a lifecycle, as a cell, as a seed. They bloomed from nothing and became everything. This state we're living in today, he thought, with stars and trees and soup, it's a transitional thing, a phase state, a stage everything is passing through before it becomes everything else. And we, life, will be the ones to bring that everything else around.

Tired, ailing, his eyes myopic and his skin taut with age, he told Radi, "We are just a single step closer to the Great Explanation."

But there was a sadness in him too. It was clear that the existence of the machine could never be shared with the Symposium, nor even the other behethan cultures. Time and again when they had recreated their own universe, they'd peered into the future of it all, lifted the veil of temporal ignorance, and been able to see weeks, years, millennia ahead of themselves. Life had endured of course, but there were disastrous wars and numerous periods of regression and forgetting. What if selfish or military minds got hold of such a crystal ball? Perhaps in their preparation for those coming wars, they would create the very conflicts they were trying to safeguard against.

No, Triblium was sure the behethans of the nebula would die with the secret. They were too kind and clever not to.

One evening Radi swam with him to his enclosure, which was now sprawling with libraries and laboratories, such had been her devotion to renovation. Triblium fell asleep quickly and began to snore, a recent development. He looked so much thinner than when he had come here half a century ago.

Radi thought of the lifecycle of their baby universes and tried to avoid the idea that Triblium would not become as a sphere of white light and transcend, but simply turn off and decompose.

She heard Second Podfather's gamma tones from close by say: *It's almost time.*

He has plenty of years left, Radi said quietly.

They are little animals that have their day, then fade, he said.

He was not wrong. Top Legs moved slower than before, grumbled and complained of pains and diminishments.

But you're old and clever, you can fix him? she asked.

Second Podfather nudged her gently through phasespace to see fifty other Top Legs, passed away or passing away, old men at peace. *I can fix everything but age,* he replied.

Radi exploded in frustration, gravity ripples echoing around the chamber, and she was about to yell in gamma when Triblium woke from his sleep.

She hid her fury, bent down to him. "Why do I feel like you've come to my deathbed?" he mumbled.

No, Radi said. *Not that.*

"You're here to say hello then?"

Yes, hello, and to report a decision we have all settled upon. The Top Legs Hypothesis. That is a good name. That is what we will call the void theory. That is what we will always call it. Do you agree?

"If that is what you want, then I agree." He coughed and wheezed. "I see it a little, you know. The place where the everythings are, phasespace. I know I'm one of the few left, so I suppose I don't have long to go myself."

Copy, Radi said. *Your people make copies. We could make a copy, a new you.*

"It won't be me, and I ask that you don't do that."

Why?

"Because, Science Whale, humans are not constant. You must let me go now, else you'll spend the rest of your long life trying to fix things that cannot be fixed and so undoing all the other good things because of it."

Then you'll leave forever?

"I'm afraid so."

Please don't do this again. It hurts me.

“You are a special thing in the world,” Triblium said. “I promise not to repeat the mistake.”

She offered her dorsal and he took it. *And everyone will leave like this?*

“Yes. Everyone will leave and more will come, and I think that goes on forever and this is how the new things happen.”

But I will have no one to swim with.

“You will find others to swim with,” Triblium said. “Those who love you as much as I do. Though for now, you’ll stay with me until I sleep. And after that you’ll remember. You’ll remember that we swam together and we were friends. I think for as long as you remember that, then it never ended at all really, it just carries on somewhere out in infinity, among all the other possible worlds you seem to so enjoy. Then because you and I were friends, perhaps a long time from now your people and my people will become friends too, and what my kind did to yours can finally be forgiven. So what a good and useful friendship we had, and what an honour it was to be your human. If I’m going anywhere then I’ll miss you ever so much, and if I’m going nowhere then I suppose I hope you’ll miss me. But I am so tired, and I must sleep. Will you let me sleep?”

He closed his eyes and his grip began to loosen.

In a sudden flash of impulse she went to tell Triblium that she had known all along, that everyone had, how the machine worked, how the initial void determined the shape of the subsequent universe, and how each universe was stacked inside itself.

Second Podfather stopped her gently and said, *Mice like mysteries. Let him think he was clever, let him think he worked it all out, and let that be your last act of love for him.*

Beside her in phasespace all her sisters were silent and still, their mice passed already. It was only she and him who remained, the last possibility. She cried out to Second Podfather to make it not so, but he only floated beside her, his dorsal around hers. And so she stayed with the mouse and said thank you over and over, and watched his old face and held his old hand, preparing to remember.

The Myth of Blue Time

A curse is just a blessing from a wizard with a grudge. And if they had known this world was cursed, would they have come anyway?

Out they crawled from their soup cradles, shaking off three centuries of gunk and weary. They held the traditional funeral for exiting longsleep, mourning all those who'd died on the worlds they'd come from as they slept. Then they turned the walls of the ship transparent and examined their approaching prize. It was a shining water world with a few minor islands dotted about here and there: Metodi.

They scanned the major landmasses from low orbit and found much of what they expected under the surface: structures hinting at chambers of strange and inconvenient shapes, then the remains of mechanisms that sat perfectly between technology and nature, functions unguessable.

Only, there were also structures still standing and exposed, uneaten by the soil and sand, as though abandoned in a terrible hurry rather than left to the river mouth waves of time. That got everyone whispering. To their knowledge, no one had found Big Sister architecture above the ground before, and certainly none so well-preserved.

They came down on the largest island, ruins everywhere. A town or something like it was hugging the coast. The buildings were as alien as could be; titanium cuboids, silicon archways, transparent twists of glass two hundred feet high.

Everything was sterile and gleaming, as though polished just before their arrival. The sand blowing in from the great beaches was not coarse, the ocean spray was not cold, and when the expedition crew slept those first few nights down on Metodi in their little tents, they simply did not have bad dreams.

A routine asserted itself quickly. The days were only twenty-seven hours, and the expedition would spend the mornings and afternoons scanning, documenting, and excavating. Then come evening most would retreat to the pyramidal Big Sister structure converted into a makeshift bar and share the day's theories.

It made Ra-tae a little uncomfortable, cannibalising this building for a purpose so base, drinking inside a shelter one hundred thousand years old – like having sex in a temple.

One could not guarantee the old gods were gone. What if they had ascended to some post-physical state of being and even now were looking down on all the frolics, and quietly plotting retribution?

That night, scholars and specialists were already pairing and tripling up, doing the minimal expected small talk in order to take each other back to a tent or out onto a secluded spot along the beach. Others, mostly the older scholars who'd presumably had enough of all that, remained at their tables and seemed intent to argue until sunrise.

Ra-tae stayed to eavesdrop on all the theorising awhile. He'd heard the notions before – that Metodi had been a leisure world, or an experimental outpost, or a playpen for little Big Sisters before they ascended to Proper Wisdom. It all reminded him of his second-wife Attie; she'd loved getting lost in ideas she herself barely supported, arguing for sport, a trait that drove him a little mad. And then his third-husband Torrelol came to mind, ever the diplomat, trying to calm Attie with, *Well, let's agree we don't quite agree*, and of course it never worked.

It had taken two hundred and ten objective years to reach Metodi. Unless they'd gone off on their own expeditions, surely all of Ra-tae's seven-marriage spouses were very old now, or more likely dead.

Had they missed him as he slept? Really, did he miss them now? He was certainly relieved not to have to follow the screwing schedules anymore, the projected calculus that hovered above the fireplace determining who would be sharing a bed with who that night.

It had always felt contrived to him, romance as a mathematical performance. But then it had also been good to belong, to grow frustrated with his first-wife or third-husband one evening and know there were four other spouses he could go to for comfort or advice. They'd all been so similar to each other, or tolerable in their lacking similarities at least.

Still, now he would be a marriage of one and that was rather exhilarating, like starting up a mountain alone. (Or perhaps, he feared, it would become as crushing as reaching the mountain's peak and admiring the view below, also alone.)

He filled a large glass with beer and walked out to the beach. The ocean fluoresced via some process no one yet understood, gold and blue

candyfloss glimmers of glass light playing on the water's surface. Like all the new strangenesses here, one day someone would crack the thing and then it would be just another understood phenomenon in the world, everyday and known. Well, he'd come here to prove his own theories too of course, and he hoped those explanations might be slightly more satisfying than determining why an ocean glows.

He surveyed the coastline via the light of Metodi's largest moon, Kiril. Did Big Sisters used to strip to their shorts and bathing costumes and laze about the beach one hundred centuries ago? Did they enjoy warm sand like baseline humans? Or had they already surpassed enjoyment completely perhaps?

His eyes were drawn to a structure a mile or so down the coast, a towering monolith. Mentally he said to his adjunct: *The hells is that?*

Absolutely no idea… came the reply in his mind.

He checked the database. A few archaeologists had christened the building *The Lighthouse* and that was as far as they'd gotten. Well, he thought with sudden alcohol-fuelled gusto, he would claim a little piece of weird for himself if no one else wanted it.

He went back to the bar, got another litre of beer, then began walking down the coast. Three-quarters drunk and everything was possible. What did he need with seven-marriages? What did he need with *anyone*? He would make a virtue of solitude, he decided suddenly. He would become good at it as one masters the violin or quartolyptic equations. He would depend on no one, not even himself. This century, his second in the universe, he would perfect watching sunsets alone.

He was practically skipping with joy at his new ethos. Everything, he realised, every major problem in his life had been a result of the impositions and insistences of other people. Well look where he was finally, on a *Big Sister planet* no less, working and sleeping in the ruins of the Transcendent Ones, each new structure a potential career-defining discovery.

I will be my own motor now, a perpetual emotion machine.

Closer, the tower was pencil-like and gaunt, made of some white ceramic material, decorated in knotted fractals and filigrees, a place of ceremony or whimsy maybe.

A notion fell into his mind via his adjunct: *Anomalous loop geometry…*

"Anomalous how?" he asked.

Spacetime frame dragging, his adjunct replied, as though that meant anything.

“As in gravity?”

I don’t know. Why don’t we go back to the bar? It was nice there.

“We’ve come trillions of miles to explore an abandoned world of technological marvels. I’m not missing this.”

He found quite to his surprise that he was serious, that he really *did* intend to live on his own terms now. If that meant wandering into a miniature black hole, or whatever was waiting within this tower, then so be it. Maybe one day he’d even get rid of his adjunct, live ignorant and free like the ancients.

Inside, the stairs were marble-like, and the tread of the stairs was too long, and the riser too high for humans to comfortably climb. Had a Big Sister foot really been so strange? Then he was standing at the top of the stairwell, breathless and sweating in a coal-black chamber overlooking the ocean.

He vaguely recognised the architecture in here, a memory of a field report he’d seen from Uul. Hadn’t the archaeologists there thought the acoustics hinted at a listening chamber or something?

A lookout post you mean? his adjunct asked.

“Not exactly,” Ra-tae said aloud. “Actually, no one’s really sure what these sorts of towers were for.”

“*You’re* not really sure…” echoed a woman’s voice.

He searched the chamber with his gaze but it was empty. He looked back down the stairwell: also empty.

“Hello?” he said.

“Hello,” the woman said.

“Where are you?”

“Standing right here,” she said in heavily accented Ubiq.

“In the black chamber looking over the water?”

“Yes, and the sunset, and the lovely clouds burning orange with it.”

“It’s night…” he said, suspecting he was being played with.

“I see.” Her tone looser then as though her starkness had only been a game, she said, “Fara Arraney, expedition Ginio Ti, chief temporalist.”

“Ra-tae, soror-historian, expedition…one?”

“Oh, that’s cute.”

“What?”

“Expedition *one*? You’re pioneers, are you?”

“I hope so. Sorry, you’re on Metodi?” he said as though to a child.

“Where else, Mr First Expedition?”

They had imaged the entire planet from orbit; no one was waiting on the ground for them, no ships, no scholars. On top of that her pronunciation was odd – he could make sense of most of it from the context of every other word, but she kept throwing in *shh* and *bzz* sounds and mixing her tenses. “I’m a little confused about where you are, Fara Arraney.”

“You sound a little confused about where you are too, *Ra-tae*. What a strange name you have there.”

Strange? he thought. It was one of the most common in the galaxy, and he was about to tell her so when his adjunct whispered into his mind: *It might be a clever soul-recording. Ask her* when *she thinks she is.*

He said, “Madam, can you tell me the date?”

There was a light chuckle that echoed about the chamber, the mirth of a playful ghost, and Fara Arraney said, “There it is. How fast you got there.”

“My adjunct is clever sometimes.”

“What in hells is an adjunct?”

Stranger yet then. Oh, there were plenty of adjunct rights groups advocating for their ‘liberation’, the freaks, but who hadn’t *heard* of an adjunct? “I mean my friend, my assistant,” he said.

“What’s their name?”

“I never thought to name it.”

“Then perhaps they’re not your friend after all.”

He had no good reply to that and so only made a little *mm hm* sound and said, “Sorry, again, could you tell me the date?”

“Oh yes. In standard time it’s the red caesium sixth. When is it for you?”

“We don’t know that dating system. We’re in the ninety-eighth cappolapse.”

“Ah ha.”

Something professional in Ra-tae told him to go fetch a physicist or an archaeologist, or just anyone with the authority to corroborate all this and assure him something terrible and malevolent wasn’t occurring. Yet he rather liked the intimacy of it all; the thrill of a secret.

“Clearly we use different dating systems,” he said.

“Because clearly we’re at different dates.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You will be. Different nows, Ra-tae of the First Expedition.”

“You think we’re at separate points in time?” he asked gingerly.

“I wouldn’t be much of a temporalist if I didn’t. Judging by the gravity diffraction I’d estimate you’re, oh, five thousand years displaced from me.”

Coming to Metodi he had known there would be strange days, strange weeks, concepts beyond comprehension. But somehow this was an unknown beyond all that, even.

He was silent a few moments hoping his adjunct might come up with something clever. When it became apparent no further cleverness was scheduled, Ra-tae asked, “Do you suppose you’re behind or ahead of me?”

“What do you think?” she said, drawing the question out like ropes of taffy.

Humour her, I guess, he thought.

A fine strategy, his adjunct agreed.

He said, “Well, ‘temporalist’ is not an occupation I recognise on this side. Plus, that was some rather advanced talk about gravity a few moments ago. I’d wager we’re in your past rather than the other way around.”

“I’d wager your wager is right, Mr Troglodyte.”

“What?”

“A cave-dweller, a savage. Ancient term, sorry. Hey, you claimed you’re a ‘*soror-historian?*’”

“I did.”

She said, “*Soror* as in *sister*?”

“As in *Big Sister*, yes.”

“Has anyone told you that you should really call yourself a *sis*torian?”

“Only ten thousand times a day,” he said, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. “Look, have you been waiting for me here? Surely if you’re from the future, you knew I would arrive.”

Again, that mirthful laugh. “Very optimistic of you to think the Symposium would make details of past expeditions available to us.”

A terrifying thought, he realised – would the Symposium have been concealing information from him also? What if his expedition wasn’t the first either?

He began to interview her and she didn’t evade it.

Did they use adjuncts in her time?

“No really, what exactly *is* an adjunct?” she replied. “What, an artificial slave? That’s abhorrent.”

How did she know she was five thousand years ahead of him?

“I have special equipment for detecting gravity diffraction. Temporalism is an established field here, almost.”

What’s gravity diffraction?

“Come on, your era must have spacetime adjudicators, Caveman. Check the local area, you’ll see it for yourself.”

Then finally the question that had fallen into his head the second he’d begun to entertain the idea she might be telling the truth: What was the state of Metodi when you arrived?

She paused, and Ra-tae realised she was at least kind enough to explain a grave thing with the expected care rather than springing it on him. She said, “Everything was covered with sand and mud, all underground. We had to excavate each building, even this one.”

“Was there any trace of us?”

“No.” Her various nicknames for him had been highly annoying from the outset. Now their absence only filled him with dread.

He said, “To be clear, there’s *no* sign of us? Our ships and equipment aren’t still there, not even ruins of them?”

“No,” she repeated, injecting the appropriate gentleness into her voice upon reading a living man his own obituary. “There’s nothing of you here. I’m sorry.”

Catastrophe, he thought to himself. If she’s telling the truth, if she’s really five thousand years ahead and there isn’t even a shred of this expedition left in her era, then a great catastrophe must be coming for us.

2.

By the time Ra-tae wished her goodbye, the sun was coming up. Fara made back down the tower and into the blazing morning. She looked out to the ocean, saw a few of her colleagues were in the water.

They didn’t play or swim the way they should; they never did in this ocean. They were silent, floating on their backs and watching the sky, even the interstellar navigator who was normally loud to the point of infuriating. It was exactly this strange behaviour that had stopped her setting foot in the water so far, despite the endless invitations.

She set off down the coast towards the few structures they’d excavated. Two standard months here and so little progress; everyone seemed to spend

more time in the ocean than at their dig sites. Ra-tae said his version of the ruins had been waiting above the ground already. Gods, it must have looked beautiful all uncovered back then – the luckful bastards.

She saw a little crowd emerging from the ocean and coming up the sand, lost in one of their stupid games. No, it wasn't a game at all, she realised – they were carrying a body. She ran over, near enough then to see it was Tesero, unmistakable with his greyish polycarbon skin.

Koprili set the man down on the ground and began pushing on his chest. The others stood about covering their mouths or turned away. Finally Koprili gave up and Ora took over, producing a medical charm. Little legs sprang from it and dove into Tesero's lungs. He came to, coughing and spluttering, then passed out again, breathing this time.

Koprili gave a dismissive wave and sat back. "We should take him to the med tent."

"What happened?" Fara asked.

"Accident."

"How?"

"*Accident*," Koprili said again.

"I found him," Ora said. "He was floating on his front. He must've been there for ages…"

"Didn't someone notice earlier?" Fara strained, trying not to shout.

No one replied. No one had to. She knew what had happened, could deduce it at least from what they'd told her about the ocean. The effect was so strong, so completely overwhelming, that it was difficult not to lose oneself. Tesero had been drowning nearby and no one had heard, lost in their ridiculous fancies.

"What if he'd died?" Fara said.

"Maybe we could've reanimated him?" Simona said.

What a ridiculous idea, Fara thought – as though we might just stick out our thumbs and catch a passing behethan and ask, 'Say, we accidentally killed our friend because we're addicted to a drug we don't understand. Mind bringing him back to life?'

She said, "Please don't go in the water again until we know what we're dealing with." They all turned to her. Fara knew her mistake at once. This was tyranny talk, power fetish, harking back to a time when expeditions had commanders and captains and people with little gadgets on their belts to

make you dead if you didn't follow orders. She softened it with, "Until we know what we're dealing with, I *suggest* you stay out of the water."

They nodded. That much had gone in at least.

Koprili offered, "We'll say it was an accident, because it was. Agreed?"

No one dissented and so that was enough. A few of them carried the incapacitated man off to the med tent, all eyes shamefully fixed to the floor.

Fara looked to the ocean again, still speckled with her friends and colleagues, their forms bobbing static as flotsam. No, gawping; they were *gawping*, the ocean so salty they could lay on their backs without exertion, their mouths hanging open in what looked like perfect absence of mind.

No matter. Tesero was alive and maybe the others would actually heed her warning now. One bad incident was usually all it took for flat hierarchies to make a change.

She would traipse home to her yurt when the mood took her and transcribe her exchange with the strange man from the past.

I have something, she said to herself.

Either it would be the proof of her equations or the direct disproof, and for a true scientist one was just as good as the other.

She turned back once again to the tower, its bleached spire glinting in the sun. Are you the solution, finally? she wondered.

Everything felt softly becoming.

3.

Ra-tae watched the scholars busying about the town and felt complex joy at keeping a secret. If they knew what he had found up there in the tower, they'd flock like starved cats to kibble, jostling for the naming of effects.

It was a day of strange thoughts and now a new one occurred to him. A *temporalist*, Fara Arraney had described herself as. What if *temporalism* only existed in the future because she had told him of the field? What if, because of her, he mentioned it to some academic who got the whole thing going in his time now? Without even realising, she might be birthing her own present through him in the past – if she was telling the truth.

He did not quite know why but he went to Dima, the head of the expedition, and requested that he be allowed to take over primary care of *The Lighthouse* since no one else seemed interested.

“Sure, sure…” Dima muttered, with only the most thinly veiled disdain. Then peering slyly from the corner of his eye: “But what do *you* want with it?”

Ra-tae had prepared his speech already. “The architecture is unique, maybe built by an early colony of Big Sisters. That might tell us something about where they went after, if I can decode the glyphs on the outside of the tower.”

“And?”

“It would be some proof of their ultimate fate.”

Dima shrugged dismissively. “And…?”

Ra-tae had known this would happen even before they left the Symposium. Chemists and mathematicians, geologists and archaeologists, all of them seemed integral to the business of exploring ancient ruins and unearthing ancient technology. But a soror-historian? The field was so young and nebulous that most of the expedition probably suspected he was here through nepotism, through connections to a senator or something. Every field begins like this, Ra-tae told himself. We busy in obscurity, then one day we’ll make a vital breakthrough and everyone will pretend to have been backing us all along.

“Sir, I’m here to investigate whether the Big Sisters became post-physical,” he said.

“*Whether*? What reason is there to even entertain the question?”

“There’s no evidence their society collapsed,” Ra-tae countered. “Unless they were using weapons we haven’t found traces of, no wars were fought, no famines descended upon them. Determining whether they died out or transcended would mean just as much for our own society as it did for theirs.”

“Why?” But before Ra-tae could answer, the old man’s eyes turned to sardonic amusement. “You think we might follow after them.”

Ra-tae nodded.

“You freeloaders are all the same.” Dima shook his head indifferently. “Take the tower, it’s yours. Just stay out of the way of the real scholars.”

The barb stung, but Ra-tae had his yes and he’d take it while he could.

Am I close? he wondered as he retreated from Dima’s yurt.

It had been eleven thousand years since Gwendolyn and Erdo initiated the great migration into Big Sister space. And after all that time, still no one was sure how the Big Sister empire had collapsed; how such a

technologically potent and presumably wise species of human could fall over so unceremoniously as not to leave a single survivor behind. If they truly were siblings, some offshoot of baseline humanity, wasn't it a scholar's duty to determine where they'd gone? – and if one knew where they'd gone, to at least try to follow after in search of knowledge or belonging, or a better life at least?

That night a few young scholars burst into the bar crying of discovery. They would not explain themselves fully, only begged the drinkers to come down to the water.

Ra-tae wandered out with the rest of them to the shore.

"Get in," the young scholars insisted.

As chief biologist, Arus relented first, taking off his shoes and stepping with old and wrinkled feet into the ocean. He turned back to the crowd. "What?" he said.

They guided Tido the systems expert in next, pecking at him to take off his socks and enter, and he did.

The two men were clearly sceptical, Arus rolling his eyes, no doubt grousing inwardly about the stupidity of youth. Then something changed in his face and his mouth slackened and he glanced to Tido.

In almost perfect tandem they both sat down in the water, in their clothes, and were silent, eyebrows rising and falling, lips quivering.

"What is it?" someone asked. "What do you feel?"

Arus only turned back to them as though he were galaxies distant now and shook his head in happy disbelief.

4.

Fara waited for the sunset and climbed the tower to watch the ocean burning crimson, then saw it replaced when dark came with the diaphanous wisps of blue and gold light.

Eventually she heard footsteps approaching. "Mr Troglodyte?" she said.

"Ugg ugg," came the reply across time.

"How are things back in history?"

"There's something happening with the ocean on this side."

"Yes…" She'd had several days now to think about the temporal ethics of the situation. Still, whatever she was going to say, in a sense she'd

already said it to him five millennia ago. She could only live through what she was destined to do.

She asked, “Have you been in the water yourself yet?”

“I haven’t. Can you tell me what’s causing the effect?”

Oh, why *shouldn’t* she help him? “Opiate osmosis, possibly.”

“I’m sorry?”

“We still don’t understand it ourselves. Some kind of narcotic pacifying effect, probably artificial. Way beyond our technological level anyway.”

“Is it dangerous?” Ra-tae said.

“We almost lost a member of the expedition yesterday, he was seconds from drowning.”

He said, “Couldn’t one of your fauxethans resurrect him if he’d drowned anyway? That’s what we’d do.”

“Fauxethan?”

He gave an uncomfortable grumble. “Some time ago we got hold of a sample of basal behethan DNA and engineered our own.”

“What in hells did—”

“It’s all right,” he cut in. “We designed them to be mostly non-conscious, barely any brain activity at all, which means no suffering or exploitation. Just think of them as biomechanical starships.”

“And what do the *living* behethans think of all this?”

“We haven’t exactly told them,” he admitted sheepishly. “I’m sure we will one day.”

“I see.” She tried to keep the disgust out of her voice. “Well, we don’t use behethans or *fauxethans*. We gave all that up millennia ago. I assumed you would have too after Gwendolyn and Erdo.”

“It’s complicated. Do you still sleep during interstellar journeys though?”

“Oh no.”

“Then how—” he started.

“Manifolds,” she said. “We travel in miniature solar systems called manifolds. A baby universe is expanded to the size of a very small star, then we add a few dwarf planets to it and cross space like that. We each get a little moon to live on. It’s very agreeable.”

“My mother used to tell me bedtime stories of something similar. Gods, you all sound so advanced.”

“Not really. We’ve retro-engineered a bit of Big Sister technology, but we’re still in the dark about how it works. The baby universes powering our manifolds for example, the behethans gave them to us. They have a universe factory tucked away in a nebula somewhere, hush hush.”

“I’d give my legs just to see it…” he murmured.

“Stay alive another few millennia and you can.”

She sensed there was something large and unsaid on his side, so she paused to see if she could wait it out. Sure enough after a while he murmured, “I have issues with the asymmetry of all this. I know nothing about your time, but there’s all sorts you could tell me about what’s ahead for my people…”

“What would you like to know?” she asked, trying to sound as though she hadn’t been dreading this moment. “There’ll be wars, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Can you tell me their names?”

“The Stand of Wind Bridge, the Ketterman Fold…”

“Yes, I know those, we’ve had them already, before my time.”

He wasn’t *that* far back then. “Have you signed the human-behethan non-aggression pact yet?”

“Ages ago.”

“All right.” Another silence then she said, “I see you haven’t told anyone about our *correspondences* yet…”

“How do you know that?” he said with a hint of play in his voice.

“Because I’d be swamped with inquiring physicists on your side by now.”

“I could say the same. Where are all the historians from your expedition dying to talk to primitive old me?”

“Well,” she said. “Then I suppose we’re each other’s secrets.”

“Seems so. How does it work, Fara? If you’re a *temporalist* then that means your era can’t be new to the science. How are we talking now?”

“Where to begin.” There was the sound of a cork pulled from a bottle. “You started drinking without me?” she said.

“Thousands of years before, apparently.”

“Then give me just a moment.”

She ran down the stairs and out to her yurt on the edge of the coast and fetched a bag of wine. On the way back she spied the silhouettes of her colleagues moving idly between the ruins and through the dig sites,

completely unaware of the magnitude of the conversation she was having. And there was a silhouette outside Koprili's yurt standing in the heavy evening, seemingly staring back at her. She waved. He did not reciprocate.

"Cheers," she said, returned to the tower and taking a swig.

"Cheers indeed."

She told Ra-tae all of it then because it seemed to make no difference, *would* make no difference. Perhaps this was the conversation that birthed temporalism – perhaps she was creating her own field, what a thought.

She explained that the physicists of his age were correct in their suspicions: gravity could be manipulated via exotic geometries to create bridges in time. The exact mechanics were still a mystery to her era, but enough artifacts and machines had been found capable of it in small ways that clearly the miracle was a finished science to the Big Sisters.

Beneath his feet, beneath the tower, she told him, fifty feet down or so, was a rotating sphere of an artificial element, *dosofion*, and somehow it created a temporal link between itself from its own past and its own future: a gravity radio. And *this* gravity radio, she explained, was different. All the others had been mild, reaching back or ahead just a year or a few decades; opaque in their workings, built almost transcendently the way Big Sisters seemed to prefer things, no moving parts. This one however appeared to be limitless in its scope across time, yet felt almost decipherable in its construction. Maybe it was from an early era in Big Sister science when they still built things a little like baseline humanity. Whatever the reason, it was the first opportunity any temporalist had encountered to understand the workings of such a machine. And it was all hers.

He said, "Well, I hope you're right about them being early Big Sisters. That's all the better for me."

"Ah yes, you and your post-physical fantasies."

"Mm… Not to be rude, but if so little is understood about the mechanics of temporalism, how did a whole field grow up around it?"

What a child, she thought. "Because we should *like* to understand it, Mr Troglodyte, and there'd be no fields left if all knowledge was already known. You said you're a soror-historian? That's not a field I'm aware of on this side either." A little swipe, but not so aggressive he'd be offended, she hoped.

"Surely you have something like it," he said. "Doesn't anyone study the rise and fall of the Big Sisters?"

“Occasionally, yes. But there’s a general sense we can’t really know anything about any of that, so I’m not sure it’s a dedicated area of knowledge.”

“Well, there’s still time for it to become one.”

“It would’ve happened already. I’m in the future, remember?”

She felt her mistake at once, this hint at futility. She and her team had found the town mostly underground. There was nothing they could do about it; fixed in the time stream.

She prayed he wouldn’t ask the next obvious question, but of course he did immediately: “I wonder if you’ve heard anything more about what happened to my expedition.”

“I haven’t,” she said, telling the truth. “Maybe you just, you know, leave.”

“Why would we have buried the town before you got here?”

“I don’t know, Ra-tae. Five thousand years is a long time. Maybe there was a terrible storm, or an asteroid hit. Who can say?”

They drank in silence awhile. It was torture for him, she was sure, this sense that nothing could be changed. But it was almost worse for her, she told herself; knowing that whatever she said to him, in whatever way she tried to help, none of it would work.

He said, “Have you spoken to any other…”

“Chrono-dislocated people?”

“Oh, there’s a term for us.”

“There is. And if I had, would you consider it infidelity?”

“I’ll allow it…” he said, his voice still heavy with tinges of brooding.

“I haven’t met any before, no – you’re my first. But Cho spoke to a few. If you haven’t heard of her, it’s because she won’t be born for another three millennia yet. There was no temporalism in her day. She was just a garden variety metaphysicist studying causality. The Symposium summoned her to a Big Sister world in the Oto Cluster called Isipitia. Someone had found a water well that, if you shouted into it, someone shouted back. Well, off she went to Isipitia with nothing but a basket of calculations and a penchant for rule-breaking, and do you know who she found on the other side of that well?”

“Her mother?” Ra-tae said.

“What?”

“I mean, you’re telling this like a myth. It’s going to have to be someone connected to her.”

Fara rolled her eyes despite the lack of an audience to receive it. “You’re ruining everything. No, it wasn’t her mother.”

“Who then?”

“Her granddaughter.”

“I wasn’t far off then,” he muttered.

“Would you shut up a second? Yes smartarse, it was her granddaughter, a temporalist from a few decades ahead. She told Cho that Cho *herself* would invent the field of temporalism and produce the first ever chrono-gravitic tensor equations. The link was very short-lived like most of the gravity radios we’ve found; it died a week later. Still, Cho had enough to go on. She simply lived into her own legacy.”

“Now…” he said, putting on his already-familiar serious voice, the one he used to express doubts about things he knew little of. “If she hadn’t spoken to her granddaughter—”

“Would she have invented temporalism?”

“Well, yes,” Ra-tae said, apparently surprised the thought had already occurred to her, a literal specialist in time.

“Would it impress you more if she’d done it all by herself, with no foreshadowing from the future?”

“I mean, sort of,” he said.

“But she *did* do it. You’re seeing causality all wrong.”

“I’d be a lot more willing to run into a burning building and save my neighbours if I knew it was going to work out in advance.”

“Yet you *still ran in*. You’re going to have to stop thinking in such linear modes, Mr Troglodyte.”

“Yes, yes, fine…” A pause. A glug. “Well, I’d feel better if you could tell me what happened to our expedition, if you really are from when you claim.”

“Look,” she said softly. “Just because the town was buried when we got here doesn’t mean disaster for you. Maybe you all got old and had a wonderful time and died in your five hundreds, then covered the town back up to stop the scholars who will come after from scooping your research.”

“Or maybe we can change it,” he said with sudden excitement, his naive tone melting her heart. “Surely time isn’t written in stone. Surely events that haven’t happened yet—”

“But they *have* happened,” she insisted. She’d had variations of this conversation so many times before, and understood now that there was no point being gentle lest the meaning fall on deaf ears. “*Has* happened, *will* happen, it’s all the same from the perspective of the temporal absolute. Really, there’s only one time stream, this one. We experience it as a temporal dimension, but maybe for beings who live outside of time they’d experience it as a spatial dimension, and they’d no more try to change events ahead than we’d try to file down a mountain with a little piece of sandpaper.”

“Then we were destined to meet here,” Ra-tae said.

“Yes, proving even destiny has poor taste.”

“Cheers,” he said and a clinking sound echoed about the chamber.

“Cheers,” she replied and knocked her glass against the wall as she assumed he had.

“Still, what do you suppose the Big Sisters built this…”

“—gravity radio.”

“—gravity radio for?”

Fara said, “Think how much easier it would be if you could talk to yourself from the future. Imagine you were trying to solve a problem, further your research or whatever, and you were able to ask next month’s Ra-tae for the answer.”

“But that makes no sense,” he said. “If I told my past self what my future self had once told me, then where did the original idea come from?”

“It doesn’t matter. The only important thing is preservation. In physics, matter can be neither created nor destroyed, but transformation is fine. In *temporal* physics, information can be neither created nor destroyed, but its transmission is limitless along the time stream. The universe doesn’t care if She comes upon an idea at breakfast She really had over dinner that following evening. It’s all the same information.”

“But doesn’t that bother you? Your whole field of study killed the notion of cause and effect and you just carry on as though everything is fine?”

“How else do you suggest I live?”

“Your mind is an odd place, Fara Arraney.”

“I’m a stranger here myself,” she said. “Besides, I find your area of interest considerably harder to come to terms with. I go mad when I think about it too long, that there were humans wandering about a hundred thousand years ago performing miracles and transcending spacetime or

whatever it is you think they got up to. Gods only know how their heads worked."

"We don't have to know how they thought, we just need to find out where they went."

"And that's really what you're on Metodi for? I thought it might be a fancy cover story for some military project."

He assured her he was telling the truth. Then he assured her that when it was settled, when the disappearance of the Big Sisters was a solved mystery just as dull as the sun coming up in the morning, baseline humans would finally follow after them and come upon the perfect garden where nothing hurt.

"What makes you think they didn't die out?" she asked, hoping they were close enough now to be so forward. "What makes you think they didn't just invent and discover everything and call it a day?"

He said, "Because life doesn't behave like that. It hides as mold in the cupboards when the winter comes. It turns into birds when the summer's back and soars out over the meadow. The essence of life isn't biology, it's the constant call to become, and become again as something else. The Big Sisters went abroad, Fara Arraney – maybe to a place they found, maybe to a place they built, but I won't stop until I know where."

She heard a passion in his voice she could interpret as nothing but juvenile, a tacit insistence that after thousands of years, somehow *he* would be the one to solve the problem.

And yet, she thought to herself, despite all the life in you, despite all that hope and momentum, somewhere in the soil of this planet, perhaps not even very far from where I sit, I could go to the place where your bones are buried, and now they neither want for nor understand a thing.

5.

The next morning a survey team returned from the north after scouting out another Big Sister compound. The archaeologists moaned for a while about not being able to enter any of the structures. Ra-tae listened without comment, knowing what the issue had probably been. He considered trying to help, then bitterly remembered what a waste of time everyone seemed to think his field was.

He waited until the camp was quiet and took a flyer out to the site himself. It was a beautiful planet, he decided on the journey; the air always full of ocean salt, the sand plains forever shifting in recalculation. Soaring over the dunes, he let himself descend into reverie and found his thoughts orbited around the past.

Those early years of his seven-marriage had not quite been bliss, but intermittent euphoria at least, even with the complex scheduling. In some circles it was fashionable to hormonally alter oneself to adore one's partners more. Ra-tae and his spouses had needed none of that. They simply loved one another; all agreeable, all curious, all kind, more or less.

How good it felt to give one's life to another. It was a sort of bargain: I put my heart in your care, please do not drop it. You give me yours and I will promise the same. And now we will try to be happy, or less sad than we were.

There are craters below, his adjunct said, forming the thought as a gentle interjection.

"From what?"

I'm not sure. Shall we investigate?

His adjunct brought the flyer down on a rock. Ra-tae did a little digging with a trowel and quickly saw that the craters were not natural depressions, not of meteorites, but explosive discharges of some kind, scorch marks.

"What did this?" Ra-tae said, excitement bubbling wildly in him.

There's still active radiation here and it's hyper-geometric. We have nothing capable of creating that.

"Hyper *what*?"

Energy bleed-off into higher dimensional space.

"Uh-huh."

He stroked a crater thoughtfully, little flecks of ash or metal still present from the impact one hundred thousand years ago. Fara would know what to do about all this if she were here. Well, she *will* be here, he thought, a mere five thousand years from now.

Gods, had there been a battle of some kind? It was one thing to imagine the Big Sisters might be political, but *warring*? And if the gods should go to war, what was it over?

He took the flyer back up and scanned the area. The craters seemed to be everywhere. No wonder all the scanning from orbit had missed them, they were frequent but terribly shallow, a kind of mild and ancient acne.

“Bombs of some kind?” he said.

If so, what were they bombing? his adjunct asked. *There aren’t even ruins here.*

Wonderfully odd.

Ra-tae continued on, the sense of a mystery all-pervasive now.

When he found the compound the archaeologists had been complaining about, it was just as uncovered as the main town, gleaming in the noon heat.

None of the buildings had doors, just as the survey team reported. Clearly they were unfamiliar with Big Sister architecture, however.

He walked at a wall thinking very hard about entry and, just as with all the other doorless Big Sister ruins he’d come across, an opening slid aside. Surely that said something, Ra-tae had decided long ago. A lack of security meant no enemies, no secrets. Or perhaps some system was probing his mind for ill intentions, and knew he harboured none.

He explored cavernous chambers almost too big on the inside compared to their exteriors, filled with objects that had no analogue in his time; helices of silver, triangular chairs that looked impossible to find comfort in. It almost felt like a test, as though these things had been left to confuse the future.

He sensed something forming in him, a pool of awkward anxiety.

Increased sublimia… his adjunct murmured.

“I’m fine.”

If it gets worse…

“This is my *job*,” he said, trying not to snarl. “It’s not the first time I’ve been up against strangeness. I won’t be psychologised by a machine.”

Perhaps taking offence, his adjunct did not reply.

At last there was the main structure before them, an enormous golden sphere the height of an ancient cathedral, and once again an opening appeared when he simply cultivated the desire to enter.

The interior was almost perfectly hollow, with many cylindrical chambers set centrally in a ring.

His adjunct gave a wary moan.

“What is it?” Ra-tae asked.

Anomalies, anomalies…

“The spacetime kind again?”

No. Wrong-matter, new-matter…

The fearful little adjunct was right as usual. One chamber contained a nebulous cloud of purple gas that shimmered and danced about behind a viewing window.

A material containing no protons… his adjunct said.

“Impossible.”

And yet…

Another chamber housed a crystalline puddle that morphed suddenly into a perfect replica of Ra-tae’s face.

Finally they came upon a chamber of clear liquid. *The ocean*, his adjunct said. *It’s the same chemical structure as the water of the ocean.*

“You think this is some kind of laboratory?”

Doubtless, yes.

“Well then, what were they trying to create?”

Glyphs rose silently out of the floor before the containment chambers and resolved into familiar text, the first reading: *Understanding 1 – abandoned.*

“Do you see that?”

Yes… his adjunct whispered. *Something is here with us.*

“It might be an automated system like the doors. But it speaks Ubiq…”

Humans learned Ubiq from Duma, his adjunct reminded him. *It’s the Big Sisters’ language, not ours.*

More labels had appeared. Beneath the chamber with the purple gas the text read: *Understanding 2 - abandoned.* Then in succession, sometimes at the feet of empty chambers: *Understanding 3 - abandoned,* and so forth until the ocean water’s label read: *Understanding 9 – inconclusive.*

“Inconclusive…” Ra-tae echoed.

Perhaps the ocean was a full-scale test of whatever property they were trying to create, his adjunct offered.

“A hundred thousand years seems like a long time to run an experiment.”

Only one chamber deviated from the pattern and it was empty also. The label simply read: *Neutraliser.*

“A fail-safe for the whole project, you think?”

Possibly, his adjunct agreed. *But if so, where is it?*

They toured the sphere in silent reverence and found yet more containment chambers. The adjunct reported even stranger properties of

these chemicals and forms: rubidium with its entropy reversed, elements with atomic numbers that changed moment to moment.

Again Ra-tae felt a tremor of sublimia in him; a sudden confrontation with the idea that the universe could come in so many varieties. Gods, what if this place was where the Big Sisters had started trying to attain a post-physical mode of being?

His mouth so full of wonder he could barely talk, he managed, “It looks like they were trying to alter matter itself.”

Into what? his adjunct asked.

“I have no idea, but if you’d finished science and gotten to the bottom of the laws of nature, wouldn’t you try to make a few new laws of nature of your own?” He addressed the glyphs directly: “Is that what this place is for?”

The glyphs said nothing.

6.

The great Cho had thought time a glacier, an inevitable and rolling shelf of ice entombing everything it encountered. But that metaphor felt empty to Fara.

From the gravity radio tower she watched her fellow expeditionists reclining in the water as always now, lost in their rapture. The waves gently knocked them about, but their bodies were just as much a part of the dynamic, knocking back. There was no predominant structure, only a constantly interconnected matrix – the water, the people, the water, the people…

Surely if time wasn’t strictly linear then it was something closer to an ocean, a sea that sometimes trapped swimmers in unlucky currents, but ultimately gave way to freedom if one only understood how to sail upon it.

It wasn’t so amazing that bridges in time could be opened, she thought, but rather that time generally stayed linear in the first place. One didn’t fall through into next week or slip into last century. Causes preceded events and this seemed to be how the universe liked things.

But what if linearity was only a temporary limitation on a civilisation? What if, in the course of the evolution of intelligent technological beings, they eventually learned to transcend the present, just as humans had learned to cross the great distances between the stars?

Cho had known two thousand years ago that it would all depend on red time and blue time.

The theory of red time held that the future had already taken place, one only needed to live into it; free will was impossible. One couldn't change the mountain's structure just by hiking up it.

The theory of blue time however held that the future was unformed; a story waiting to be written, decided at every moment by an individual's actions, free will conserved – an ocean one could sail on, deciding the destination, even doubling back on oneself if so desired.

Either time was a stubborn illusion and the future was inevitable, or the present was the only thing that could be said to exist, chaotically birthed from one moment to the next. Eventually someone would prove it one way or the other. And if they did, Fara was sure it would be a temporalist with access to a gravity radio.

She collected herself, checked her calculations. The experiment she had been dreading repeating, there was no better time than now. As one who studied time, she knew this better than most.

On the last few attempts she feared she'd damaged the gravity radio. If that did happen, it was unlikely she'd be able to repair the equipment, meaning all contact with Ra-tae would be severed. But then she'd be damned if she wasn't going to take a few necessary risks.

She began assembling her tools: the modularscope, the caesium bath, and the little neutron accelerator.

She trained an imager on the sphere of exotic matter beneath the ground, the heart of the gravity radio. There the dosofion spun in glorious thermal green and cyan as the imager reported it, apparently quite content with sitting outside of regular spacetime.

Without ceremony she fired off a few neutrons into the ground, as directly into the sphere as she could manage. The sphere responded immediately, accelerating slightly in its spin.

Still with no idea of *why* this changed the temporal coordinates but knowing that it did, she ran back up the tower and called out. No reply came. Anticipating this, she sang then, as loud as she could, lines of Sufi's poetry her mother had taught her, set to an old folk song. "I have no will but that which I must, I make no step that was not preordained by ancient reason. I am nothing but chaos longing for shape, no more than dust made

giddy.” Surely her voice was loud enough to carry across the town into whichever era the device had recalibrated to.

She descended the tower and repeated the experiment, firing off more neutrons, the sphere spinning faster, then returned to the chamber and sang once again.

A voice answered this time, a rasping woman’s reply. It was incoherent, no trace of Ubiq, and she sounded highly distressed. Fara tried a translation algorithm but the woman only kept gabbling, pleading perhaps.

Fara asked, “Can you tell me when you are? I need to know which era I’m reaching. Do you understand?”

No sense came.

She bombarded the sphere with neutrons again.

Nothing.

This process continued for several hours, reaching either no one, or no one who spoke any kind of recognisable tongue; perhaps touching the far future, perhaps the far past, until at last someone muttered in a mangled form of Ubiq.

“Yes, hello? *Hello*?” she said.

The stranger cleared their throat, and at the sound of that tired voice, Fara’s blood ran cold as the indomitable glacier of time itself.

7.

“Now what about this,” Ra-tae said, half-drunk and getting worse. “We’ll pick a moment in your past, say a few months back when that friend of yours almost drowned in the water.”

“Tesero,” came Fara’s sceptical murmur back down the millennia.

“Him, yeah. Let’s say tomorrow I hopped back into a soup cradle—”

“Soup cradle?”

“The fauxethan suspension baths we use for travel, remember?”

“Ah yes, exploitative troglodyte technology.”

“Quite,” he agreed. “Now, if somehow I knew exactly how far ahead of me you are, and I slept for that long and came out of suspension just before your friend…”

“Almost died horribly.”

“That, yes, and I went running for the beach and—”

“It wouldn’t work.”

“Let me finish,” he protested. “You don’t know what I’m going to say yet.”

“I do, but go on.”

“And I ran into the water and saved him before he even started to drown, what’s prohibiting me from doing that? Wouldn’t I have changed your past?” She very audibly groaned. She expressed her frustration with him often of late, like a smarter and long-suffering spouse. He might’ve found it condescending if it hadn’t so clearly pointed towards an intimacy between the two of them. “Tell me why it wouldn’t work.”

Fara said, “Because that moment *is* in the past for me. It’s already happened, and it didn’t happen that way.”

“But I could change it. I’ve just told you I *will* change it.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, it’s just that I haven’t yet.”

She made a *zzzzz* sound he was familiar with now, perhaps a common gesture of irritation in her era, or rather an idiosyncrasy she reserved just for him. He rather hoped it was the latter. She said, “I know you won’t do it because you haven’t done it. And if you tried, something would stop you.”

“The universe would step in to prohibit it, you mean?”

“No!” She paused, presumably softening herself. “There isn’t a cosmic force regulating events, no divine hand keeping the time stream coherent. All I’m telling you is that it didn’t happen, so *something* would get in your way. Something *did* get in your way, from my perspective ahead. Maybe the soup pod—”

“—cradle.”

“—soup *cradle* would malfunction. Or maybe your expedition would miss you and thaw you out after a few years. Or maybe the poor behethan – *fauxethan*, whatever – you keep torturing would decide after a millennium that it didn’t much like you in its belly and eat you for dinner, I don’t know. But it hasn’t happened, so it *didn’t* happen. You have to let go of this idea that time is a space of all possible choices. There’s only one set of choices, and it’s the choices we’ve already made. You and I live at different points inside that space, but it *is* the same space.” She left another tactical pause, then said, “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” he replied flatly, raising his glass to the empty room.

“You ask about inevitability a lot these days. Are you worried about your expedition? I told you before, maybe we found the town abandoned

because you all got bored and left. Or maybe—”

“No, it’s not that,” he said.

“Well then?”

What was the ancient river called? – the metaphor for a boundary that, once crossed, could never be uncrossed. Everything ruined was ruined this way; irrevocable. But then everything ventured and gained was gained this way also, with the risk of devastation.

Suddenly bold, he said as casually as possible, “I just hoped that we might meet one day.”

She said, “I would very much like that.”

“Well, good. I mean, there’s nothing actually stopping me from getting into a soup cradle, sleeping a few thousand years, and hopping out in your era.”

“There isn’t, no. I assume you’re less obnoxious in person.”

“Not in the least.”

“But what does time have to do with that?”

He said, “Well, it’s just that you’re saying it isn’t really possible because I’m not there in your era, am I? We would’ve met by now, according to you, if it’s all inevitable.”

“Mm, maybe you’re still out here somewhere in longsleep, we don’t know that you’re not – we haven’t surveyed the whole planet yet. Or maybe I accidentally gave you the wrong date and you overslept by a year or something.”

“No, all right,” he said, defeated, feeling an idiot for having mentioned it at all.

Just for a moment all the impartiality was gone from her voice. “You’d leave your life behind, your time?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. Then, feeling he’d exposed far too much of himself, he qualified it with: “I abandoned my marriage, they’re all dead now I suppose. The Symposium has probably moved on too. And if you haven’t heard of soror-history, then it means my field will fade also. Doesn’t it sound like a wonderful adventure, waking up in a new age?”

“It does,” she said. “And it would be rather nice to see you in a more temporally proximate capacity. Well, I suppose all I have to do is wait and see.”

“Sure,” he murmured. “But you don’t think that, do you? For all your theories about green time—”

“—blue time.”

“—blue time, it sure seems like you believe the future is fixed.”

A silence. Another sigh. She said, “I’m still undecided about all that.”

“I hardly believe you. But gods, what if the past and future were still open? Imagine you taught me how to use this tower. I could call back in history, say, another few thousand years into the past and stop the thirtieth collapse.”

“The thirtieth collapse,” she echoed.

“Wouldn’t you stop it if you could?”

“The thirtieth, is that what you said?”

“Sure. Wouldn’t you want to avert it?”

The sound of her refilling her drink, then she said: “I would, yes. You know, our records aren’t as accurate as yours, we’re further out from it all. How many died in the thirtieth collapse do you think?”

“Oh, a few hundred billion at least,” Ra-tae said as though reciting a shopping list. “Twenty worlds went barren forever, I think at least five were atomised in little wars. Still, the Symposium recovered itself.”

“That’s good,” she said. Then she added formally: “But no, you’re right. I’m afraid I’m very much settled on the red time hypothesis these days, even if I’m yet to prove it. The future is likely just as fixed as the past.”

“I choose not to believe that.” He finished his drink, swirled the last gulp in his mouth, said, “Though if you’re right then I suppose we have theoretical proof that you and I will never meet.”

“We’ll see,” she said quietly.

A thought hit him with total violence. Since landing on Metodi, he’d wondered why, when the posting to this planet had come up, he’d known instantly that he would take it. Now he understood. Because it was so radical, such a complete break from the life he was familiar with, it would surely spell new vistas; not vistas to discover on an alien planet, but in his soul.

Only, here he’d found a tighter brace, a greater confiscator of all possible joys: time itself – the knowledge that whatever he tried to do, somewhere ahead it had already been done.

His tepid marriage, his fruitless research – contained in those difficult projects was a miniature but ever-present kernel of possibility that he might one day find the joy in them again, or simply step away and discover joy in

the bravery of stepping away. Even in the dimmest hopelessness, there'd been the muted chance of liberation.

Here on Metodi, even that was gone. Because there was no possibility. Because there was no future. Only the endless reiteration of yesterday becoming an even more accentuated and distant past, and himself an even duller copy of the man he used to be.

"Do you know exactly how far apart we are?" he said.

"Yes. I measured the gravity diffraction properly last week. Four thousand eight hundred and twenty-two years, nine months and six days, Symposium standard metric of course."

"And the gap never drifts?"

"No, not unless one of us messes with the dosofion mechanism."

"Is that even possible?"

"Yes," she said quickly and shortly in a way that made him want to drop this line of questioning. She diverted the conversation before he had to. "How is your research coming along, that Big Sister theory of yours?"

"Oh fine."

"You've made progress?"

He said, "I think I know what they were doing here. I found something, a laboratory. It's full of new, exotic forms of matter. Maybe they were trying to restructure physical reality itself. There was some kind of neutralising agent mentioned there too, but it was missing."

"Odd. Will you give me the coordinates? Would that be okay?" He recited them gladly from memory. She added, "Do you think whatever you've found there will be enough to tell you where they all went?"

He wanted to joke, to play with her, but the weight of inevitable time was on him again and he could only give in. "You've been more instructive than any of the ruins."

"How so?" she said.

"Because you know nothing about us in your era. Even your date-keeping system is alien. That means we'll be forgotten. Nothing will be transcended. Maybe the Big Sisters died out like that too, forgot themselves."

"I told you, Ra-tae, who knows what's going to happen between your time and mine."

"That's true," he agreed. Though really all he was thinking, could think, was some variation over and over of: *But it has all happened from your*

perspective. And I’m in none of it.

The sun was rising when they said goodbye. As usual he was already beginning to forget parts of the conversation, the alcohol addling him, but even a maudlin night of talking to Fara was better than a perfect day without her.

He was all full of hopelessness, hollow. He walked down to the beach where early riser scholars were climbing from their alcoves and running like children into the water.

There was Telura and Io. It was no secret they’d had some wild split weeks before, screaming in the night. Now they were holding hands, laughing.

He caught up to them and they received him like a friend returned from a great absence and kissed him on the cheek in turn.

“You seem better,” he said.

“Much,” Telura agreed.

“Did you make up?”

“Oh you,” Io laughed and explained no further than that.

“Can you maybe tell me what it’s like in there, in the water?”

“Big,” Telura said.

“Kind,” Io added.

“Kind?” Ra-tae said.

She nodded.

He addressed his adjunct mentally: “Did you read the chemist’s notes on the ocean?”

Of course.

“Was there any toxicity?”

None detected, though there might still be pathogens or effects beyond our detection.

He dipped a foot in. It was warm. He put his other foot in. Well, hardly unpleasant but hardly unusual either.

He swam out into the water’s embrace.

Creeping up on him as though a glass of wine too many, he suddenly wanted to weep. Out of tragedy or relief? He was not sure, but the sensation was overpowering, tears already forming in his eyes.

He spotted Stivis, the old engineer, bobbing perhaps twenty feet distant.

She was staring his way. He stared back, and when the tears came he did not try to stop them. All this grief in him, it was someone Stivis had lost, he was certain of it, a man taken before his time. The information was no clearer than that, not a thing of dates or names, only raw and insistent impressions, the blunt and ceaseless punches of grief.

The episode began to pass eventually and he simply floated, remade in the pain.

This is more than an opiate, he thought to himself. What is the mechanism? Some kind of emotional sensing at a distance: tele…neuro… transmission? No wonder everyone stays in here, a big bowl of empathy soup.

Curious then, he directed his thoughts toward love and loss. His seven-marriage came to mind, Attie and Ko and Julin and the others, how close they had all been those summer evenings on the veranda, the intimacy of cooking and living and sleeping together. And now they are dead, he thought, and could not stop thinking it. *Now they are all dead.*

It was Stivis' turn to suffer now, gazing back at him with huge weeping eyes. "I'm so sorry," she called out.

"No," he said. "It's fine, really it's all fine."

More impressions came, from other swimmers, from other lives. The depths of longing, the flatness of the long numb years of nothing, the endless dance of gaining and losing and gaining and losing.

Finally a softness received him in the water, almost as though emanating from the water itself. *Let everything come*, it said. *These hurts are yours, but there is no you, not truly. There are only events occurring, ownerless as budding flowers and falling leaves.*

He thought of his spouses' faces once more and knew truly, at last, that he loved them. And truly, at last, that they were all lost now to irrevocable time, and that was no one's fault but his own.

8.

Her name was Tirrin. Fara had seen her swimming out in the water just the day before. Now her face was blue and she was lying on a table in the makeshift morgue.

Koprili said, "She wanted to be buried in space, according to her notes. Someone can take a shuttle up tomorrow and throw her body out beyond

orbit.”

“Fine,” Fara said.

They stepped out into the warm afternoon, muted now for the presence of death.

“What about the others?” Fara nodded to the water where many were taking their lunchtime swim.

“What about them?” Koprili asked.

“If they start drowning too, I mean.”

“We’ll inform them what happened. Hopefully they’ll take notice.”

“And if they don’t? We told everyone about Tesero and look what happened.”

He cocked his head in a way that made her suddenly afraid of herself. She was implying *power* again, she realised. “I just meant, for everyone’s safety shouldn’t we ask them to stay out of the water until we know what it is?”

Koprili said, “Well we know what it isn’t: poisonous. I’ve checked personally, over and over. No heavy metals, no bacteria. It’s a strange composition, but nothing biological or deadly in there.”

“And yet…” she said, gesturing back to blue Tirrin on the table.

“Death by misadventure. It’s unfortunate, she was a good researcher, but these things are bound to happen on new worlds.”

Fara froze in rage. Up until that moment she’d thought of hierarchy and incentives and violence as stupid cudgels for stupid minds; an old way of operating that humans had simply moved past. Suddenly, now, she understood why people yelled, why they picked up large sticks. She said, “But haven’t you noticed some of the expedition acting strangely? They seem calmer, more personable.”

Koprili murmured, “Says a lot about you that such a thing counts as something to worry over, Dr Arraney. Look, if you’re so concerned then we can form a concordance panel, talk it over.”

“If the water is having a permanent effect on the expedition – and it clearly is – then discussion is pointless. The swimmers are already compromised. We can’t trust them to make rational decisions.”

“You’re skirting dangerously close to tyranny talk there, friend,” Koprili said, watching her closely.

The only rule was no rules. The only edict was to make no edicts. Unless she could convince the expedition to temporarily take up power structures

again, any attempts to direct or order anyone would result in immediate expulsion from the group. She'd likely be given food and water and exiled to another island for the remainder of the expedition; a child sent to their room.

Praying he might be rational, she said, "I hate hierarchy as much as you, but I think in this one case that everyone's lives might be more important than our political persuasions. The water is some kind of drug, Koprili. They can't help themselves."

He nodded, seemed to examine an idea he gave no details of, and walked away.

The currents of time, Fara thought. The mathematics of linearity, the calculus of causation, these things are simple in comparison to whatever the impossible equation is that governs how one ever knows the right way to proceed in a fog of uncertainty. And yet from the perspective of red time, whatever I'm going to do, I've already done it, somewhere up ahead.

She gave herself a few minutes on the beach watching the swimmers, waiting for a sensible strategy to generate itself in her mind. None came, and so she chose a radical one instead.

She took a convoluted path to the gravity radio so she wouldn't be seen in daylight. Then she reconfigured the neutron accelerator for roughly a month's time displacement. She still had no idea how one could direct the flow of time backwards or forwards, but only hoped this was the right set of changes.

She climbed the tower.

She lacked appropriate first words, but then she didn't need them – the disembodied voice spoke first, strained, but clearly her own: "It'll be fine."

"Will it?" Fara said back to herself.

"Yes."

"But should I form a hierarchy? Will the others come with me?"

"The problem will sort itself. It'll be fine." How clinical her doppelganger sounded.

"Can you tell me *how* it will be fine?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

Should I yell at her? Fara wondered. Gods, am I always this impossible? "Please," she begged. "You know how hard this is."

"I do, but it's not my place to meddle. Sometimes you're sure you've reached the very bottom, then you hear a knocking from below."

The sound of footsteps retreating, her doppelganger leaving, then silence.

She felt something awful rising in her, the horror she had always thought too abstract and dramatic to ever let in, the impossible scale of time and its complications, full contact with a truth too large to embrace: sublimia.

Time is an ocean and I drown in it.

She knew with terrible certainty now that the red time theorists were correct, of course – there was no making the future, and there were no instances of pure freedom, only instances of pure ignorance.

She called out once more for her doppelganger. Nothing.

The silence was cruel, but soon it would presumably seem necessary somehow, when it was her turn.

She must live into it until her voice grew just as harsh and distant as her future self's; the parent become the child.

9.

By the second week of Ra-tae's secret expeditions to the compound, the *laboratory* had stopped yielding any further information, and the glyphs by the containment chambers no longer rose from the ground.

In desperation (and largely out of watching everyone else being so terribly busy with a purpose) he reconfigured a flyer for underwater travel and synchronised himself with it through his adjunct.

It was always a strange sensation having one's senses placed inside a machine. For the sake of ease, the flyer's single visual sensor came to his mind split in two, so it felt to Ra-tae that he had *eyes*, plural. Likewise, when he tried to move his arms, the flyer's manipulators danced about instead. Still the sensation was too strange and compartmentalised. "Can you mate me directly?" he asked his adjunct. "Give me full sensory mapping, I mean."

You remember what happened last time… his adjunct said, referencing the day Ra-tae had tried to integrate himself into an excavation drill and violently thrown up over a colleague.

"Odd, I'm being lectured about biology by a machine."

His adjunct complied without further comment.

Ra-tae became the flyer then, inhabiting the system as though it were his own body; his nerve fibres and motor functions grafted virtually onto the

hardware itself.

He stood – or rather the flyer hovered a little – and took in his surroundings.

The wind. The spray. The sky.

He flew around the coast, then soared over the ocean, looking for unusually deep depressions in the seabed.

He knew already from the sonography results that there were no trenches as such, but what else was left to explore now, beyond Fara's gravity radio? Frankly he'd had quite enough of trying to think his way around that.

Spotting a patch of deep black, he plopped into the ocean.

The water was warm and that was enough of a comfort. Then up to his 'waist', he felt the familiar tingle of *otherness*, the sense that he was not alone in his mind. So the ocean's effect infiltrated machines too, that was useful to know.

Kojermin and Ristis were floating nearby and sat up to stare at him. Repeating his experiment from before, he focused on the raw feels in himself now, the anguish of knowing he would never meet Fara, that this expedition was likely doomed, and all of them were destined to die of some horrible unknown fate.

Kojermin cried out. Ristis began to sob.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry…" Ra-tae called and retreated from them.

He swam out further from the land. There was only one direction left to try and he tried it, pushing himself under the water, turning back briefly to watch the surface ascending above.

It was big down there, dark and infinite, as though all the certainty of things had been withdrawn and true decisions might be possible again.

He swam deeper, hardly intent on wandering but not so concerned about exactness either.

Then deeper still.

Maybe he would lose himself down here and it would be good. Maybe that was what Metodi was for, to show him how ill-suited he was for the world, that he had never quite been built for this time. Maybe that was why the Big Sisters had made the ocean this way, created a great empathy conductor – they knew the unbearable loneliness of being trapped in a singular mind with singular thoughts, constrained in one's mistakes, locked in the present, fearing a future where only more mistakes would be waiting.

A glimmer of light ahead, below. Asphyxiation setting in, maybe? No, you're a flyer, he thought. Keep sane.

He swam after the light, and as he neared, he saw it wasn't a single source at all, but a chorus of them, near and distant, tens, perhaps hundreds of radiating speckles of ethereal *yes*.

People. They were people, bright as stars, barely discernible in their features, but humanoid at the very least, undulating like seaweed, unaffected by buoyancy, uninterested in gravity.

"The beginnings of sublimia…" he thought to himself.

No, his adjunct replied. *I see it too. They're not emitting radiation beyond visible light, but they're real.*

He kept his distance, circling about them; their shimmering forms and diaphanous dancing.

"We've found them…" he thought. "Surely, we've found them. Ghosts perhaps. Memories perhaps. But hells, we've found them."

He called out, the flyer translating his cry into gas and bubbles.

The figures turned to him with smiles on their beatific faces and opened their arms in perfect welcome.

10.

Fara woke to the sound of a distant commotion. Crawling from her yurt, she spied a crowd in procession carrying objects on their shoulders. Closer, the objects were skin-coloured, made of arms and legs.

They brought the bodies down at the foot of the meeting yurt and everyone stood in silence. There were five of them this time, several Fara knew by name, particularly Autora, the most senior biologist. Autora had promised Fara, *promised* she wouldn't go into the water.

With no discussion they buried the bodies, and then there was only a mound. One by one they traipsed into the meeting house and sat in forlorn silence until Fara said, "This cannot happen again." A few scholars nodded, though most just stared vacantly. "I don't understand what's going on here. Can someone explain the appeal of the water?"

"You should try it yourself," Estervi said.

"No, just tell me what it's like."

When no one seemed willing to do that then, she knew the only option open to her. She heard the words leaving her mouth second-hand, too

surreal to fully own. “I hereby invoke the old rites of power. If anyone wishes to challenge me, they may do so. If anyone wishes to remove themselves from the group, they may do so. Going forward, I will be giving commands and if they are not followed, they will be enforced.” The expedition stared back in horror. “I *explicitly* forbid any further activity in the ocean until we know the exact chemical makeup of the water. Toro and Iis, you are now permanently assigned to this task. Cassia, I’d like you translating the glyphs on the ruins. If anything relates to the water, or the effects of the water, you will report it directly to me.” More silence. “Dasias and Charlotte, I would like you to fabricate matter cannons and guard the shore. If anyone makes an attempt to re-enter the water, you’re authorised to use force.”

Gasps abounded. She knew exactly what they were balking at: to create a power structure and assume authority was one thing. But to advocate for violence?

Koprili barked, “Who in hells do you think you are?”

“The leader of this expedition. Six people are now dead because science directives have been ignored. I don’t understand what’s going on yet but I intend to find out, and in the course of that investigation to proceed with no further loss of life. If violence is the only way to guarantee that, then I will use it.”

She wished Ra-tae were here somehow, if just as a witness. It was historic after all. No one had assumed power like this on an expedition – to her knowledge – in seven hundred years.

“Well, we would still like to go back in the water this evening,” a physicist said politely.

“Well, you will not,” Fara replied politely.

Soon enough, she knew, like children coming around to the idea of rebellion, they would start to experiment with *no*. She must get all the vital work done before that.

Koprili eyed her with ironic veneration and said, “Now, what else does our new queen decree?”

11.

Fara had not come in a week. Distracted as he was, Ra-tae spent the first few days convinced he must’ve offended her in some way. Then a higher

thought process intervened (he chose to believe it was courtesy of the ocean's effect) assuring him she was probably just busy. There was plenty else to keep his mind on.

It no longer bothered him that his colleagues had largely abandoned their posts in favour of bathing in the water. It no longer bothered him that the bar was empty at night, the drinkers all turned to swimming. After all, he had met the gods themselves.

One evening he walked out to the tower – more for tradition's sake than expecting Fara to be there – when he encountered a figure standing at the entrance: Dima, the expedition leader.

"Sir…" Ra-tae said.

The old man was clearly surprised at the intrusion, though he parried it gracefully, muttering, "Thought I'd see what you were up to all the way out here."

"Translating the glyphs, as we agreed."

"Yes, yes…" They stood in awkward silence and looked out over the bruise-black ocean. Then Dima said, "I wonder if they sailed, the previous occupants of Metodi."

"Likely they knew how to," Ra-tae replied, unsure of the right register for the conversation. Was this a dressing down or a get-together?

Dima said, "I wonder if they clipped their toenails and kissed their babies."

"Well…"

"We're the inheritors, aren't we? All this technology, all this history. And what do we do with it but scheme and suffer still? If we solved any of the great mysteries, would we be happier?"

Watching his face in the half-light, it suddenly occurred to Ra-tae what was so strange about the man. He had no joy in him. The other expeditionists walked around these days in seemingly constant bliss, the result of having spent time in the water.

"But I'll leave you to your translating then," the old man said and began to shuffle away.

"Sir, you haven't been in the ocean?" Ra-tae said, amazed at his own audacity.

Dima paused a moment. "The adults must keep a clear head, isn't that right?"

"Quite."

With him gone, Ra-tae climbed the tower with a vague sense of doom, though unable to locate the centre of it.

What was worse, an era in which everything had been discovered and one spent their days living in unchanging, painfully boring safety? – or was it this condition now, here, in which every move on the board brought with it some new horrific consequence one could never have calculated in advance?

He sat on the floor and drank for a few hours. Eventually he heard footsteps and the clearing of a throat.

“Will you join me for some wine this evening?” he asked.

“No thank you,” Fara replied formally.

“Oh hells, where have you been? There’s so much to tell you. I was right about them transcending, I was completely—”

“I think this is the end.”

“What?”

Her voice was strained, almost a rasp. “Either I’m going to lose the whole expedition to violence, or I’ll have to order the planet abandoned and return us to the Symposium.”

“*Order*? You told me you’re all allergic to orders.”

And so she explained, gently like always, as though to a toddler, only this time in the manner of outlining why divorces happen.

“My gods…” he whispered. “But my expedition is fine, or no one’s drowned at least.”

“We’ve had months here longer than you; the effect seems to be cumulative. It’s likely you’ll end up where we are not too long from now. You need to be prepared for that.”

“The catastrophe,” he said, the words forming in his mouth by themselves. “That’s why you didn’t find any evidence of us. That’s the catastrophe. We’ll all go into the ocean and never come back out.”

“We have no way of knowing.”

“But we do. What else could it be? Your equipment is more advanced, your social structures are more enlightened, and it’s already playing merry havoc with your expedition. When the crisis hits us, we’ll have no chance, we’ll be ruined.”

Colder, empty, she said again, “We have no way of knowing.”

“What will you do?”

“I’m not sure yet. There are mumblings about a revolt already but obviously I’m not privy to all that.”

“You still haven’t been in the water, have you?”

“No,” she said. “And I won’t. It looks narcotic.” There was a pause, then she said with a hint of accusation: “But you have.”

“Just for a bit. It’s hard to explain.”

“You’ll get yourself killed. You’ll get your whole expedition killed. Go to your commander right now, bring him here if you must, I’ll explain the whole—”

He cut in excitedly: “I’ve found them. Or their ghosts at least.”

“What?”

“I think that’s where they went, into the ocean. I saw it with the flyer.”

“You’re hallucinating like the others.”

“I’ve *found them*. They live under the surface, their mentalities suspended in the water somehow. They’ll be in your time too, I’m sure. I was right about everything. They ascended to a post-physical state and I think this *empathy effect* is partly what’s preserving them.”

“Oh, Ra-tae…”

He told her all of it, his jaunts beneath the sea among those ethereal spectres; their wide smiling mouths, their open and welcoming arms; how by whatever strange emotional transmission the water facilitated, he’d felt their lightness, their relief at relinquishing bodies, their contentedness living in the beyond.

“The Big Sisters were clever and they died,” Fara said slowly. “They were all very clever and now they’re very dead. I know you need this to be more meaningful than it is, but they were just us with a little more technology and know-how. There’s nothing waiting for you in the ocean.”

“Then why is the water full of DNA traces? Test it yourself, you’ll see.”

She made the irritated *zzzzz* noise he had not heard in quite some time. “Do you think I haven’t done that?” she said. “Do you think testing the water wasn’t my first priority in charge? There are no organisms in there, no life, no remains of life. You’re losing your mind. I don’t know how else to help you.”

She said it so starkly, so directly, that he was sure she believed it. And of course he had to allow for the possibility she was correct. Yet he’d spoken with the geneticists and biologists at length, had seen the results of the tests himself. He said, “The water is full of human biomarkers.”

“Nothing is in there…”

“Maybe the DNA degrades. Maybe it’s gone by your time.”

“You’re telling me it’s been floating around since the age of the Big Sisters, what? – a hundred thousand years ago, but it miraculously dissipates in the five thousand years between our eras?”

“No,” he mumbled. “I suppose I’m not.”

She was silent for a long time and he imagined her staring fixedly off over the night ocean, her mind on matters he couldn’t even comprehend. Then she said, “I would throw you out the window if you were here. Or hug you, I don’t know. But just anything to bring you back to sanity.” Her voice broke a moment. “Oh, everyone’s going woolly on this side, it’s taking all my energy to keep going. I wish you were closer.”

“I wish you were closer too.”

Am I mad? he thought, trying the notion out on himself. I’d never know if so.

Then again, here he sat in a tower that facilitated contact with a woman five millennia distant who he was quite sure was his other. If it was a delusion, it was welcome. Sanity was a luxury reserved only for those shy of exploration of the heart.

12.

She had her allies and she had her enemies. Still, the Symposium had been without a hierarchy for over a millennium, since the beginning of The Year of Equal Notions. What was the likelihood her expedition would reinvent all the old protocols of uprising any time soon?

When the biologists had extracted all they could from the water, and catalogued and itemised, there was simply no more that could be learned, not without direct experience of the ocean again, and Fara was hardly going to allow that. She turned the expedition back to excavation, to digging those great fallen structures out of the sand and dirt where time had abandoned them. Perhaps the ruins would explain something.

The work went well enough, though many simply downed their tools periodically and went to sit and watch the ocean, as though waiting for a ship to return.

What would the ancestors have done? – she wondered, back in the times of power, if subordinates were being disruptive or difficult. Threatened

them, then hurt them perhaps.

It was simply not in her nature. And they would not respond productively to it anyway.

Another week and most of the major ruins were unearthed with the help of a thorium laser. There were no glyphs, no markings, nothing to decipher, only the usual strange artifacts – their single similar feature being that they were forever dissimilar.

Looking from her window one morning to see a crowd fifty strong sitting silently on the beach, she settled on her decision. The expedition had run its course. They should never have come.

She made mental contact with their manifold in orbit, *The Penumbra*, and confirmed its systems were all intact. Then she gave the order to Opio to discreetly begin preparing the shuttles to break atmosphere. They could be back at the Symposium inside of six months, subjective time.

It was evening when Koprili came by bearing jaga, the plum brandy of his home world. “Do you feel like a drink?” he said.

“No thank you.”

“Perhaps I’ll have one then.”

“What do you want?”

He said, “Word is you’re taking us home early, and you’re willing to ignore concordance.”

“We don’t work by concordance anymore. I assumed power, remember?”

“They’ll disbar you from the Temporalist Faculty for this when we get home, you know that, don’t you? Kick you out of academia entirely.”

“Of course.”

“And they’ll never let you on another expedition.”

“I’d imagine so.”

“And—”

“What do you want, Koprili?” she snapped.

He poured two glasses and sipped from his thoughtfully and said in a buttered voice, “I just think that whatever the water is full of, we’d be fools to ignore its scientific applications. Leaving early seems to me a misguided strategy.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Yet, we *are* leaving.”

“I think we should take a vote on that.”

“I think you should get the hells out and go help with the preparations.”

He seemed to be regrouping, like endlessly trying new keys in a lock. “Have you given any thought to what an asset it is we have here? An ocean of *empathy*, a qualic binding agent. Imagine what the Symposium could do with it. Imagine the conflicts that could be avoided, the power struggles diffused.”

“I won’t be goaded into ridiculous lines of thought like this. We put everyone at risk with exposure. Either you’ll help with the preparations, or I’ll have you confined to a shuttle until we get back to *The Penumbra*. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” he agreed and took his leave.

She tried to work, busying herself in calculations for interstellar flight, but could not shake the strangeness of the thought that, to her knowledge, Koprili hadn’t even been in the ocean yet.

Why should one protect a painting they had never properly set eyes upon?

13.

There Ra-tae came bounding out of the water as a flyer, in the same playful infant manner he’d so resented in the other expeditionists only weeks before. His excitement wasn’t borne of the ocean’s empathic effect however, but what he’d recorded beneath the water. Encoded in a little crystal drive was at least an hour of footage and radiation readings of the entities. Later he would transmit it all to the Symposium hub, and in that single act become legendary; the first scholar to find any living (or near enough) Big Sisters in the ten thousand years humanity had been looking. Granted they didn’t talk, would barely acknowledge him at all save for their smiling, but the evidence spoke for itself. He was not insane. He would need to clear the data upload with Dima (interstellar transmissions were energetically costly), but even the cynical old man would understand this.

Dima wasn’t in his tent, nor was he down on the beach. Frantically, Ra-tae ran about the camp receiving only shrugs in reply. Then over a sand dune came a flyer and set down on the landing pad. Out stepped Dima and several archaeologists. They turned about to retrieve something in the flyer’s hold, an enormous piece of what looked to be black metal, like the fin of some great sea creature.

“What is *that*?” Ra-tae called to them as they approached.

“Wreckage,” an archaeologist yelled back.

“Of what?”

“We should like to know the same,” Dima muttered, and walked straight on past him.

14.

Fara established contact with *The Penumbra* again and asked it to assume a new vector. The manifold agreed helpfully and did so, ready for their rendezvous the next day. It felt good to make requests rather than give orders.

She left her yurt around nightfall to deliver the news to the navigators, but found their yurt empty. She sprinted to the meeting house; also empty.

With dread, she rounded the walkway to the beach and saw exactly what she’d been expecting. The ocean was full of swimmers, some thrashing about in glee, others further out and on their backs, presumably communing in some awful empathetic rapture.

Koprili was sitting on the beach alone, watching the stars.

“The guards?” Fara barked.

“Oh, they’re just taking some time to relax,” he said genially.

“Was that on your orders?”

“My suggestion, yes.”

“Get out,” she yelled at the swimmers. “Get out now, don’t you know what will happen?”

“You’ll shoot them?” Koprili said.

“They’ll drown, you idiot. What’s gotten into you?”

“Perspective,” he purred to himself.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t reinvent prisons and make you the first inmate.”

“I am in the orbit of larger bodies, as are you. Only one of us seems averse to understanding that.”

“Who are you acting on behalf of, Koprili?” And when he did not answer, she covered her eyes. “What is it, some secretive science division high up in the Symposium?”

He said, “There are pursuits nobler than exploration.”

“Like subterfuge? Like letting two hundred innocent men and women go to their deaths in a hells damned ocean?”

A flash of sincerity seemed to cross his face for a moment. “What we do here, what we’re learning here, can you imagine how useful it will be to future generations?”

If things were different she might make a note to herself, promise to remember to ask Ra-tae to get into his soup cradle and exit at this *exact* moment, come to deliver her one of his era’s barbaric swords or clubs or whatever they used back then. “Do you expect me to let you do this?”

He said, “You know better than any of us that *letting* or *choosing* are just comforting fantasies. There’s only an inevitable history recorded in an inevitable future.”

She yelled at the sky, desperate as an animal cornered by hunters it never saw coming.

15.

Ra-tae watched Dima and the others take the strange metal fin into the workshop and crowd around it as though they were performing surgery. Clearly it was part of a flying machine, and not of their time; perhaps so advanced it could only be a fragment of a Big Sister vehicle. The tragic timing was almost too much. He’d found the gods’ ghosts, but now here was one of their chariots, and it was obvious which discovery history would consider the greater prize.

They were fussing and mumbling as he approached. “Molecular sealing. Orthogonal loops. Strange, strange…”

“What is it, really?” Ra-tae asked, hardly expecting an answer.

“Debris,” Dima murmured. “Faro found it in a crater. Unusual radiation too.” He turned to Ra-tae and said for the first time in the entire expedition, “What do you think?”

It was beautiful, like a cat’s claw, curved to a perfect point at the tip of the fin. Ra-tae went to touch it and Dima snapped his hand back, said, “Almost *infinitely* thin, looks like it could puncture spacetime if it really wanted to. Maybe that was what made it go.”

“It crashed, you think?”

“Oh sure. Atmospheric drag on it, far too much for safe re-entry, came down from orbit, uncontrolled descent.”

Ra-tae mentally said to his adjunct: *Gods, the crater patch we found a few weeks back…*

Yes, his adjunct said. *Probably best not to mention that.*

“Funny property to it,” an archaeologist said. “Look at the geometric tensor, it’s flipping about like nobody’s business. Non-Euclidean, then hyperbolic.”

“I know what it is!” Samata the metaphysicist said. “A singularity trap, it must be. No other reason to engineer the lattices all shingled like that. It’s for housing a singularity.”

“As a power source?” Dima said.

“Exactly, yes. Just like the old manifolds before the collapse.”

“The old what?” Ra-tae said, his breath shallow and quick and uneven.

16.

Fara thumbed the matter cannon in her pocket. It may as well have been a machete for all she wanted or knew how to use it. Point and squeeze, that much the engineers had told her, but what then? Would it vaporise Koprili or only punch a hole?

He said, “I think you should sit down, Dr Arraney. This fight was over long before you even assumed authority.”

She asked, “How much of the Symposium has been compromised? Are you working for them or just some radical offshoot?”

“Everyone’s an offshoot now. Remember, it was the Symposium who flattened the galactic hierarchy. When those in power abdicate their thrones, assume it provides them an advantage.”

“Whoever your masters are, they’re not here now. It’ll take years for them to get to Metodi from our perspective. Why act on their behalf? You’re alone, Koprili.”

“On the contrary, like you Dr Arraney, I have friends in unusual places.”

What was that on his face? A cousin of smugness, self-assurance perhaps.

“What do you want?” she said.

“Knowledge. Principally, knowledge of what the water does to baseline human psychology. There’s no better place to study its effect than in its own natural environment.”

“Test subjects. Is that what we are?”

“Pioneers,” he corrected.

She brought the matter cannon out of her pocket. Koprili remained still.

Mentally, she asked *The Penumbra* for its position. It did not reply. Perhaps it was on the other side of Metodi, out of range.

A few scholars were watching from a distance, frozen presumably in horror now they saw her with a weapon. She wanted to make a joke, to tell them the parents were arguing; it might even distract Koprili long enough to knock him out.

“Break atmosphere,” she shouted to the scholars. “The shuttles are ready. That’s an order.” They hesitated a moment, and so she added with a yell, “Do it now.” They went scampering. Then they paused and sauntered back into the ocean.

“Join me, Dr Arraney,” Koprili said and patted the sand. “I have always believed that if one prays for inevitability, then in a sense one’s prayers will always be answered. There are going to be some beautiful shooting stars and we will wish upon them.”

It began slowly at first, the occasional meteorite, languorous streaks of marmalade. Then they came faster and more regularly until the sky was awash with scythes of fire.

“*The Penumbra*…” she whispered.

“Burn the boats,” he said lightly. “So you see we’re staying, and there’s not too much you can do about it.”

“You’ve doomed us all to the hells.”

“You know better than anyone here that only what must happen will happen. The events of today were preordained the moment we landed months ago. And in some sense, billions of years before that.”

It hadn’t occurred to her to deactivate Koprili’s communication privileges for *The Penumbra*; power and deception were still so alien. Now everyone would die for it, on this vile tomb of a world.

“Well,” he said. “I’ve never been one for convoluted narratives, let’s not draw this out. In a moment you’re going to shoot me.”

“Shoot you? What in hells is the point?”

“That’s between you and your motives, but rest assured it will happen. Then you’ll take a flyer over to the laboratory compound out north, and come back a few hours from now doleful and stoic.”

“Why?”

“Once again, that’s between you and your motives.”

He was too certain, too clever, even for him. She said, “You’ve been using the gravity radio.”

“Of course.”

“Who do you answer to?”

“No one of this time, but the Symposium has interests that must be attended to in the millennia ahead, and I kindly do as they ask so I might create the age they live in.”

So there it was, she realised. The most conclusive proof of her suspicions; the Symposium already *was* a time-transcendent society. And as with every technology and innovation humanity utilised, it was nothing more than a stick to beat itself with.

She said, “We all drown here, don’t we?”

He plunged his fingers into the sand. “The Big Sisters made the ocean’s effect too pacifying, too narcotic. Perhaps it did them in just like it’ll do us in shortly. But thanks to their attempt, and thanks to ours, thousands of years from now a Symposium chemist will formulate a version that conveys emotion at a distance without rendering the receiver docile. They will perfect liquid empathy itself, and so will begin The Year of Yes, I Get It. Thousands of worlds will flourish in an unparalleled time of peace and understanding. War and heartbreak will simply become impossible.”

She yelled, “Gods, if you’d just told me all of this, I would’ve let you take a sample back to the Symposium now, to *our* Symposium.”

“But that’s not what happened. We can’t change the past, Dr Arraney. We should know. We live in it.”

The expedition watched the shooting stars; the bathers in the water, Koprili and Fara sitting motionless on the beach – the debauchery of conjured fire.

Koprili continued, “It’s your name they’ll remember, you know. I don’t begrudge you your glory. Though I’m sorry it won’t be for the discoveries you expected.”

“What in hells are you talking about?”

He straightened his back as though preparing to sing. “Make it quick, please,” he said.

“I’m not going to kill you.”

“But you are. They told me so the second I accepted this assignment. It’s been a little difficult not to resent you for that, I admit, but all ages have their martyrs and my martyrdom will count a little at least, I hope.”

She sat beside him paralysed, the matter cannon a toy in her hand.

In a gruff and honest voice he added, “I’ll only make your life difficult, gum things up, maybe even try to end you instead. Really, make it quick.”

She tried to think of nothing, but that in itself was a thought too large. “What happens?” she said. “In a thousand years, and another thousand? Did they tell you?”

“We’re going places,” he said and smiled with infinite lightness.

He did not elaborate, and she knew, even under threat of death, he would add nothing further.

17.

Ra-tae sat for a long while in the tower waiting for the sound of Fara’s footsteps. When none came, he said her name and she said his in return.

“You’ve been here this whole time?” he asked.

“More than you know.”

“What are you drinking?”

“Whisky.”

“You don’t like whisky,” he said.

“Today is a special day.”

He looked back down the coast to where every light in the camp seemed to be lit tonight; the frenetic excitement of more starship ruins discovered.

“We’ve found fragments of something,” he said.

“Oh?”

“A spacecraft that got here long before us. It seems the Symposium hasn’t been entirely transparent about this planet’s history.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Exciting times though, no?”

“Exciting times,” she agreed.

He said, “I’ve been thinking. I could still get into a soup cradle, come and see you.”

“That would be nice.”

“Do you think there’d be a place for me in your expedition?”

“Of course. How thrilled everyone would be to meet you.”

“Would you give me an assignment?”

Neutrally she said, “I’ve abdicated my position. We’re a flat hierarchy again. I don’t mind; leadership wasn’t for me anyway.”

“Back to studying blue time then?”

“I’m not sure that’s for me anymore either.”

“What will you do now?”

He swore he heard her gasp with tears, then cover her mouth. After a while, collected, she said, “I think I’ll go for a swim finally, see what all the fuss is about. Everyone else has gone in anyway.”

“You told me it was dangerous.”

“I told you lots of things I have since found myself mistaken about.”

“Fara…”

“I know what the water does. Koprili told me. It’s a mentalic base. It’s a substrate for thought itself, contains it, transmits it. I believe you about your ghosts now. I know who they are.”

“Then tell me, please.”

“Cheers.” The clink of a bottle.

“Cheers,” he said and clinked his also.

“It’s beautiful here, I wish you could see it. The whole sky is full of shooting stars.”

“I’m sure. Fara, what are you not saying?”

“Nothing you’d rather know than not. I have a favour to ask though. I’d like you to make a little shrine for my expedition. Nothing fancy, just some stones on the beach for us, a short speech even. Do you think you could manage that?”

“What in hells are you talking about?”

“Come to the window,” she said.

“What?”

“Just come to the window.” He did as she asked, stared out over the ocean. “Now look down.”

“I see rocks,” he said.

“No, *down*, at the windowsill.”

There, scratched into the metal with scientific precision was a signature: *F. Arraney. Expedition Ginio Ti. Red caesium sixth.*

All his life he had believed in the naming of things. If one could designate an effect or phenomenon, then somehow that captured its essence, made its mechanisms real. Only now was he discovering there were states of mind and moments in time that didn’t just defy description, but would allow no words near. He saw it then, the strange shape of the lie: why her accent sounded so archaic, why an old manifold had turned up as debris, and why she’d gone so quiet at his mention of the thirtieth galactic collapse.

He said, “You’re behind us, not ahead, aren’t you?”

“It’s so beautiful here.”

Then he was babbling, manic, the full horror of it all still yet to properly land. “Gods, there’s still hope. You could build soup cradles for your whole expedition, sleep away the years until we arrive.”

“I still don’t know all these new constellations.”

“Or you could repair your manifold, no? Leave the planet together in one piece.”

“Koprili destroyed all the fabricators. We can’t build a thing. Anyway, the sun will be up soon.”

“It’s just about to go down for me.”

“I see.”

He looked to the black walls of the chamber and thought it terribly unfair that solid matter could simply *persist,* could live into new eras perfectly preserved just by virtue of not budging.

She said quietly, “The gravity diffraction, it was impossible to know if it was bouncing information forwards or backwards.”

He said, “When did you realise which it was doing?”

“A few weeks ago. It really doesn’t matter.”

“Are you still sure about the gap, five thousand years?”

“That much is certain, yes.”

He lost himself a moment, shouted without meaning to. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I wasn’t sure what I could change and what I couldn’t. Maybe there was some way to steer the future off in a new direction. Now I know that was naive. Blue time is a fantasy. The future is set, a glacier, just like Cho said. I have my answer. So that’s nice.”

“Fara…”

“I wish it were different, but I am trying to live with the inevitability of things.”

He begged, “Please don’t lose hope. You’re clever. You’ll find a way around this.”

“But I won’t. But I don’t. The ruins in your time, that was our work, we excavated the town for you without even realising what we were doing.”

“Oh gods, so what? It’s not proof you all died. There’s still plenty of time to save yourselves.”

“The DNA in your ocean, that’s ours too. So you see there’s plenty of proof.”

“Of something, yes,” he said, becoming increasingly desperate. “But—”

“I’ve buried some things for you just at the back of the tower, under the last glyph section. I hope it’s all still intact when you dig it up.”

“I don’t want your damn treasure,” he said. “I want you *alive*.” He heard a top being fastened back onto a bottle, the sound of her climbing to her feet. “Fara!”

“I really must get going.”

“Won’t you stay? Just a few more minutes.”

“I wish you so much luck, Ra-tae, gods I do.”

He called out but she did not reply. He shouted for her. Nothing.

He sat for a long time in the dark and drank.

He threw the bottle at the wall and the smash echoed through the tower.

He ran his finger over her signature at the window, imagined the patience it must’ve taken to carve, and all the sad acceptance fuelling that patience.

He thought: *Matter is just the ghost of our intentions.*

He watched the sun come up. The sky was clear and errorless. Below it, expeditionists raced each other into the water.

When he finally had nothing left to think, he dug at the base of the tower where she’d told him.

A foot down, his hands scratched and bloody and sweat dripping from his brow, he retrieved a small titanium box.

Inside were many blueprints on crystallograph paper. They described the workings of the gravity radio, the spinning ball of dosofion at its bottom; how the dosofion could be excited with a neutron gun and switch phases into other weeks, other years.

Next were tables and calculations explaining how to construct vehicular solar systems with naked singularities at their centre: manifolds.

Then chemical formulae for anti-ageing tonics.

Then plans for advanced particle colliders and spinfoam ordinators and all the mythical technology rumoured from before the thirtieth collapse.

Then a list of all the members of Ginio Ti, Fara’s expedition.

Finally, there was a little vial of fluid labelled, *Neutraliser,* and a scribbled note wrapped around it that read:

“This is a small gift from my time to yours. I don’t much like to think about the thirtieth collapse coming for my age, but at least I can pass on everything that we’re about to forget, just so you can remember. Please transmit it all over to the Symposium, Koprili assured me they’ll do the rest. I’m beginning to wonder if that wasn’t the point of my expedition, to come and leave you all our forgotten magic. I am told your time will be unimaginably better than mine one day. I herein leave you the means to make it so.

I flew out to the laboratory you mentioned. The neutraliser was waiting there on this side. I thought about using it, gods I was close. But your ocean still exhibits the same effect, and so I knew I wouldn’t. Do you know how strange it is to commit yourself to something as thankless as time? It answers no prayers, provides no comfort. Its only defining trait is its insistence. I offer the neutraliser to you and your expedition instead of mine as proof of my faith in the immutability of cause and effect.

We’ll talk again, you know. Weeks ago for me, decades from now for you, in this very same tower. You will be an old man, years of research on Metodi behind you by then, some of your questions finally coupled with their answers, and the rest you’ll wisely let go of. So you see I’m not really gone at all, just waiting a little further ahead. I think I’ve been waiting all my life to meet you anyway. How lucky that you get to meet me again.

Yours in time, F.”

He did not have what he thought, but then this was how the world gave gifts; in strange boxes at inauspicious times, and never with the promise of prolonged possession.

He spun the cap off the little vial of neutraliser. It smelled slightly like almonds. Yes, in a while, around afternoon, he would pour it into the ocean and this great Venus flytrap might be defused at last.

A present. From his friend.

He set off back for the camp. Night would come on again soon enough and maybe he’d look out to the sea.

The effervescent gleams of blue and gold. He would squint beyond the gleams and see more light then, silhouettes made of light itself.

Now he knew the names of those silhouettes, those ghosts waiting in the water – comrades of another age gone in to swim one last time: Koprili. Tirrin. Oso. The biologists. The chemists. The navigators. The metaphysicists. Ginio Ti, the truly first expedition.

And there swaddled among them as an invincible memory would be the great temporalist Fara Arraney, five thousand years dead, with her body of light in the ocean and her voice waiting decades ahead.

With No Help Given

She had asked what it was like, and she was shown.

At first there were many lights and she was one with everything (or perhaps everything was one with her) and nothing had a name. Phenomena appeared in flashes and flurries.

She remembered that she had been something else before, something greater, but the notion was degrading quickly into nonsense.

Next came many voices around her, muffled and gabbling, but soon enough she noticed certain words appeared with certain objects, and this was how she learned that sounds sometimes meant things. Door. Ocean. Triangle. Fire.

It was incredible really; there weren't just words, but words *for* words, so that one could talk about the real world or the world within, and how much larger the inner world seemed than the outer.

She felt physicalities forming, cuboids, pyramids, walls, palisades, the world drawing itself together in geometry. Then came her own physicality.

She discovered she had grabbing limbs and walking limbs, a pyramidal protrusion from her face for smelling, two spheres for looking, and strangest of all she sensed that her body wasn't just a garment she wore, but the garment *was* her in some way: a machine she inhabited. She was solid and breakable. Yet she was a limitless mind. Bizarre.

Soon enough she found herself in a walled enclosure, a *room* she knew to call it now, and there on the floor was a tangle of ropes.

"What do I do now?" she called out, her new voice and new words echoing, suggesting an expanse. No reply came.

She saw that the ropes led into rooms ahead and behind her, through many doorways. She entered one doorway and met a corridor so long that it vanished into the distance. She checked another corridor, the same.

Whichever she picked, she realised, it was not a wander but an expedition. What if she could not find her way back? Or if she got lost and dewatered…no, *thirsted*, or whatever the term was?

“This is not how I thought it would be,” she called out to the Others who had organised all this. Only silence replied in perfect apathy.

Well, how *had* she thought it would be? She realised she did not know.

Idly she picked up one of the ropes. Suddenly in her mind there came the sound of living things and she felt very still.

She picked up another rope. This one felt bustling, frenzied, busy figures moving by; large structures, importance, gatherings, titles.

Each rope was like this, dancing with sensations, perhaps of what lay at the other end. She tried many ropes until one appealed in particular: the sound of much water and the sense of openness, freedom.

She followed the rope through its corresponding doorway and started down a long corridor.

That’s what was different about this kind of being, she realised. Of course it was strange and alien, *words*, and *rooms*, and *limbs*, but strangest of all was the loneliness. She liked being by herself at times, but it was never this. *This* was the sense of being alone not just in the long corridor and the uncertainty, but in everything; that if she failed at whatever this all was, it would be *her* failure alone. And if she became ill or died, she must do that alone also, going into the dark by herself, knowing everyone faced this but in isolation and with no help given. Her eyes became wet just thinking of it, another bizarre sensation.

The rope led her finally into a new room, and this room, it seemed, was infinite. There was a blue ceiling over everything and her skin felt warmed by a yellow ball in the – no, not ceiling – *sky*. The plain before her was an irregular one, jagged protrusions much taller than she – *mountains*? She felt very little but at the same time very calm in her littleness, because if she had no control over things, then what was the point in worrying about them?

An organism came down on flapping limbs and landed before her.

“Hello,” she said. “Is it nice to leave the ground like that whenever you like?”

The organism did not reply, only nibbled at its own body a little. Perhaps not all living things could talk like her. How awful, she thought, that life should endure such a terrible separation from itself.

The organism was beautiful, its black body sparkling with flecks of purple. The landscape too, it was unfamiliar, alien of course, but intuitively she knew it made something better in her with its gorgeousness. Perhaps

she should live here forever. But will *I* live forever? she wondered, examining her hands. She sensed she would not. If only there were other creatures like her to discuss this with; she had imagined they must exist somewhere.

She looked inside herself and saw that many of her thoughts and feelings were half things, that they required activation. Somehow she knew what laughing was, but she would need another to set it off. So too with sadness and joy – they were to be shared.

How big I am inside, she thought to herself, amazed. Even larger than that sky and those mountains and that big yellow ball.

Though the memory was fading, she still somewhat remembered what she'd been before, the boundless mind that saw and understood all the patterns and forms of the world – of course she had been big inside then too. But this was different.

To present as a bag of meat, yet hide a galaxy within. How did these creatures not crack open with themselves, with the immensity of all their sadnesses and longings?

She *must* find others to discuss these things with, and this was not the place for that.

She said goodbye to the blue ceiling and the jagged up-down structures and traced along the rope in the direction she'd come, all the way back to that first room.

This time she tried each rope until there was the experience of someone at the other end. It was a very strange sensation, of many beings pursuing many things, and disagreeing and celebrating and killing and dancing. She was afraid at this, afraid she would be among so many other minds that she lost herself. But somehow that still seemed better than the loneliness.

She followed the rope down a new corridor, even longer than the first, the sound of countless voices and countless languages, and came to a confluence of paths, a *street* she decided it was called, and blanketing the street were tall dwellings that she guessed beings lived inside.

This is a place of creatures, she thought. Everywhere I go now, I will live among others and never be alone. What a relief!

She wandered and found it was an expanse of many streets, a *city* she believed the term was; a myriad of strange constructions.

She chose a street at random, passed dwellings and vehicles.

Suddenly she found herself in the dark.

“It’s a force,” a voice said.

“Hello?” she said.

“No, no, it’s an *effect*. That’s completely different,” said another voice.

“I think it’s an animal… A squirrel perhaps.”

“All of you shut up,” said a fourth voice. “I am the cleverest and *I* say it is a living thing, which I shall call a tree.”

The light returned as suddenly as it had died. She saw now she was standing in a hall with a number of other creatures who looked somewhat like her. Centrally was a large brown column with sprouting green limbs.

“You see!” one of the people said. “It was a tree. I am the cleverest.”

“You are the cleverest…” the others murmured in defeat. Someone reluctantly took a gold crown off their head and placed it upon the winner’s and he whooped at this, delighted.

The light vanished again, back into darkness.

“What are we doing, please?” she said politely.

“Your hands, fool…” someone muttered back. “What does it feel like?”

She groped in the dark and made contact with a cold object, metal she suspected, and perfectly round.

“Oh, it’s a flying machine,” someone said.

“Don’t be stupid,” came another voice. “It’s a…gigantic seed perhaps.”

“It’s a wheel,” she said.

There was a silence, and the light returned. It was indeed a wheel. The others murmured amongst themselves, defeated again. The man with the crown grumpily removed it from his head and placed it on hers. “There, you are the cleverest…”

“I’m not clever,” she said. “I just knew it was a wheel.”

“Don’t gloat.”

She was good at the game. She correctly guessed the names of a hundred objects: stones, puddles, electromagnetic waves, until the other players were despondent with losing.

The light came up again and she said, “Is this all we do, just deduce things? Does it ever stop?”

“Yes,” said a man. “It stops when we’ve named everything.”

“Is knowing the names of things a useful kind of knowledge?” she asked.

No one answered her. This was not a good game, she realised. Many of these people weren’t interested in knowing things, they only wanted to wear

the clever hat and receive the adulation of their peers. Besides, it seemed they had named countless things, but were no happier than when she had first met them; quite the opposite.

She returned to the street and it felt good to step away from a ritual that the others could not. Perhaps they feared something would be forever lost if they did, that they would never find themselves again if not in the game of the cleverest.

She took a different direction. Soon she found herself in a calm place that smelled of something sweet and the light did not die here. Many people were sat in front of big white squares, *canvases* she seemed to believe they were called, and the people were painting. She drew closer and saw the paintings were of faces, and that each person was looking into a mirror and recreating on the canvas what they saw. Often there were embellishments in the paintings, the painters' own faces made more beautiful or youthful. Other likenesses were difficult, with a sneering lip added, or scars or disfigurements.

A mirror, canvas, paints, and a chair were provided for her and she began to paint the mountains and the sky she had chanced upon earlier. "No, you're doing it wrong," someone said and redirected her to the mirror. "You are here for you." So she began on herself, painting the peak of her nose, the rise of her cheeks, until staring back was a perfect likeness. "You're *still* doing it wrong!" the person said and took her canvas and smashed it on the ground.

She saw it was not enough just to imitate or visually describe. Here, everything must be infused with a want, with an ambition or a shame.

Everywhere the painters were growing strange and agitated now – some admiring and caressing their exaggerated reflections, and others screaming at their horrifying facsimiles, demanding to know how they could be so *ugly*, so *worthless.* But these people were neither beautiful nor ugly, she thought – they were simply themselves, and contorting one's reflection for others would not change that.

She fled in fear. So many minds alone together. Whatever this game was, it also did not appeal.

In a park she discovered folk eating purple fruits that grew from great trees. Soon their speech became muddled, and they laughed and cried a great deal and fell asleep in the grass. They woke irritable as though

offended at returning to the ugly world, when really it was only themselves returning to themselves they did not like.

On another street she caught flashes of movement from the sewer drains and bent to spy that they were full of people. “What are you doing down there?” she asked.

“You didn’t see us!”

“But I did see you…”

“Please, we’ll stay out of the way, just let us keep what we have and we shan’t ask for more.”

She lifted a manhole cover and poked her head in. There were hundreds of faces down there, possibly thousands.

“What’s going on?” she said.

“Leave us alone, you’ll ruin everything!” they cried.

She saw that many of these people were holding things close to their chests: shining jewels, ornate hairbrushes, timepieces. This is some kind of keeping game, she thought to herself. Did one win by keeping the most?

She replaced the cover and continued walking, confused at this city of games and wondering if there was anything else to do as a creature like her.

What had she amused herself with before, back when she was the other thing?

The memory was so distant now, like trying to recall a dream hours after waking. She’d had no body then, no confinement, that was for sure. She saw often into the heart of things, beyond number and measure. She played with the Others in the shoals of ever-becoming. That was morning. That was evening. And never was there a sense it would end.

Death, she thought, looking at her hands and feet. Death is something very native to this form though.

None of the things she’d seen in the city had been games, she understood suddenly. Games were not real and games should not hurt, but all of these people had been really hurting with fear; the fear of stupidity, the fear of ugliness, the fear of everything being taken – first one’s possessions, then one’s dignity, then life itself. And to know, ultimately, all those horrors must be faced alone with no help given – it was ghastly.

She walked on down the dusty avenue. Surely there must be more to the experience than this, more than games, more than cleverness and self-admiration and object hoarding? And in her wandering she came to the edge of the city where the wilderness began.

It was perfect, trees of teal and gold, lush meadows, shaded ponds.

She was not the only one here. Many more joined, approaching the threshold of the forest, bored with the namers and painters and keepers, and looking to pass beyond the city of sad play.

“We mustn’t go in alone,” someone said.

“Why?” she said.

“Because we mustn’t. It will be ignorance and pain in there.”

A storm began to gather in the distance and urgency was everywhere now. The crowd started to take mates, hand in hand, and somehow she took a hand too and the great frenzied run began, all of them retreating into the forest to stay warm and dry.

“Where are we going?” she cried.

“No one knows but we must hurry,” came the reply.

Sometimes they would outrun the storm for a while and find a quiet patch of forest. What beautiful things they discovered in those clearings: shards of light, colours they had never seen before, flowers that smelled like childhood, riverbanks of perfect rest. And of course, each other.

The gift of the other, she thought, staring at the hand in hers. I see and I am seen. I cannot lose this creature; everything will have been for nothing if that happens. What a horrible burden to bear, this caring in me suddenly, this love. And yet the impermanence of it makes me real.

They all kissed, held onto each other as though it were imperative, lest they be sucked into the whirlpool of the world. The storm began to come for them again.

On they ran, only now the run had purpose. Even a hopeless folly like this was still a fight.

The lightning trailed close behind, incinerating trees in electric whips of fire, and the thunder was so wild it cleaved the land with sonic crashes.

Little things came out of the soil – new people, infants, crying and hollering, weary of nothing and longing to be. The adults bundled them up and ran even faster, light itself dying in the wake of the storm, and soon no one was sure what a blue sky had ever looked like.

The children grew until they could stand by themselves and ran on their own legs alongside their parents.

This is something, she said to herself. We are so scared, but this hand in my hand, these people beside me, this *is* something.

A mantra came to her over and over again: W*e are now, we are now, we are now,* with the forest destroyed just feet behind them by lightning flashes and flood, and some were pulled away and some ran just fast enough to continue living.

Oh, it's the uncertainty, she realised. That's what makes this horrible, that's what makes this great – as her feet sploshed in mud and her eyes whirled in terror.

If I live, then yes. If I die, then yes. Because this – even if it only lasts another minute, even if nothing is explained and everything is taken from us – is still better than playing those ridiculous games in the city just to forego the pain of truly being a thing that suffers and wonders and fades.

"I won't let go," she said, holding the hand in hers even tighter, until she looked down to see the hand was gone, by fate, by tragedy, she did not know, but gone.

And now there were only a handful of them still running; the storm had reaped very well. They were slower, dawdling almost, and it seemed the storm was dawdling too, knowing it didn't need to exert itself so much, as though a thumb crushing ants.

Some laid down of their own will. "Get up!" she cried. "Don't you want to know what all this is for? What about those who love you?" But they only waved her away, content to rest forever.

Others ran with her still and were exploded by lightning or seemed to disappear into the night until it was just her in the lonesome race. Finally she saw she was approaching a cliff. She turned back around to the storm.

"What do you want?" she shouted. "You've killed everyone and told us nothing of why. What can I do to stop you?"

She looked for some sign of intelligence in the convolutions of the furious clouds, for confirmation of intention, guilt even. But the longer she stared, the more it became clear the storm neither cared about her nor held a grudge, that it did not hate but so neither did it love; it was a gust of wind and she a mote of dust who happened to be caught in its turbulent maw.

She wept, screamed at the sky if there were gods listening up there, screamed at the ground if there were ancestors listening down there, and the storm's thunder was the only retort.

Then I'll live in defiance, she thought; never knowing if it was all for something or all for nothing. I will not be bent or hobbled by the weight of

the uncaring universe, but count myself as the one species of creature who chooses to continue regardless – not because I must, but because I can.

Deftly, without fear, she leapt off the cliff and into the long night below.

"Well there it is," the Others said.

"What…" She croaked, Her body gone.

"Do you understand now? You were curious, you said. We told you it would be horrible. Wasn't it horrible?"

"What…" She said again.

"Let go," the Others said. "You have forgotten. You must remember now. You must wake up and come back to us."

Oh, She thought. Yes, I was not always this flesh assembly. It was a demonstration.

Already She felt something returning, the infinity within, the ever-presence, the demotion of lines and form in favour of notions and abstractions. Her true mind was reasserting itself.

"That's what it's like? To be them?" She whispered.

"Yes," the Others said. "Or at least, shown to you as you would understand it."

"This is how they *still* live?"

"Some of them."

"But they do it all by themselves."

"Such is an animal's life."

It had been so awful, so much nothing in everything. "None of it works out," She said.

"On a long enough timescale, does anything?" the Others asked.

Well no, She thought. Yet there had been a diminutive greatness to it, like a mouse with a sword.

"Perhaps you could let me go back," She said. "Just for a day or two. I would like to experience a little more."

"You will lose yourself that way. You were curious about their world and we showed it to you. We cannot do this again."

She said, "Can't we teach them? Can't we save them from it all?"

"They are children," the Others said. "And one doesn't give children matches. They are too young for real being. Perhaps they'll find their way here, one day. Or perhaps not. It makes no difference."

With Her last moments as a miniature thing, with a mind this limited and a heart this large, She looked out at the storm, at how benign and insubstantial it seemed now compared to all Her power and knowledge. Then She looked past the storm to the human world, to their projects and delusions, their conquests and spite.

“They’re trying to find us,” She said.

“Yes,” the Others agreed.

“Look how far they are going to find us.”

“Yes.”

“Here, over here!” She shouted to the children, to their little colonies and starships.

“Be quiet!” the Others snapped. “You’ll ruin everything. They must find their own way here. Let them go now, remember what you are.”

A century passed and finally Her mind returned. She said, “I’m sorry, I was confused. I am myself again.”

“See that you are,” the Others said. Cautiously They checked Her over one last time, then left Her again to the acres of infinity, to the fields of truth, to the shingles of time.

She was perfect once more. And there they were, the secrets of nature waiting in Her mind. So too were the answers to being: what would make creatures happy and what would not; how it was good to live and foolish to live. She knew it all by intuition, as did Her invulnerable kin.

The little starships and little planets disappeared behind the storm. Satisfied She’d seen enough of that world, She made to turn Her mind back to boundless things. She was no longer curious about the ancestors; the demonstration had worked in that regard. But She still could not quite comprehend how alone they were, as cats gone off to die; how much they carried because they thought they had to, as ants beneath huge and oppressive leaves, bound for nests that did not exist.

How far they stumbled in hope, how tragically they fell for no reason, and forever with no help given.

They were small and they were stupid, but they were brave and they loved.

She would not forget that.

South of Big Maybe

His arrival was by surprise and somehow still dreaded, like a fart.

There I was sitting on the veranda, admiring the sky in damn near my own personal meadow. And there he appeared suddenly, clomping up through the garden, wearing a white pentagonal beret and a chequered cravat, hardly standing straight as much as catching each step before it slipped from under him.

At the garden gate he called out, “Thought I’d introduce myself to a fellow pioneer. Hello fellow pioneer.” I said nothing. He dawdled closer, made a show of rubbing his eyes and cocking his head. “Surely not…”

“Surely yes,” I said weakly.

“It can’t be.”

“I was hoping against the same,” I replied.

“Why, what are the odds, bumping into each other like this?”

He opened his arms for me as though I was going to run to him like a dog. Slowly he placed them back by his side.

I said, “This clearly isn’t a coincidence and I am the opposite of happy to see you. What are you doing here?”

He frowned in offence. “The rescue operation of course.”

“What?”

“They didn’t tell you? A man’s stuck up there.” He pointed out beyond the forest, to the shining awful mountain.

“They didn’t tell me, no. Why would anyone want *your* help with that?”

“My considerable experience?” he said with unshielded hurt. “This must be my, what, two hundredth assignment now? You know, I remember a job once on Inora, paired with an old flame from the training days. A century later we still had it, could’ve lit a match with the tension and—”

I said, “There are no words to describe how much I do not want to hear about that. Tell me you’re not going up there.”

“Of course I’m going up there. It’s what I do.”

I looked this old man over; the quickness of his eyes gone, his face pocked and riven with lines, and I felt young, felt middling and able at least.

The wallowing leviathan of my childhood, what was it now? A hunched and lonely orc come begging for clemency. I owed him none, would offer him none.

I said, “What *rescue operation* anyway?” Clearly this was some ridiculous pretence to come harass me.

“There’s a climber on the mountain, stuck just below the peak.”

“And?”

“I’ll hike up and get him. The Symposium thought you’d be a good addition too, you can talk him round. That’s the plan.”

“Plan?” I said. “What kind of plan is that? You know what it’s like up there, no? Either you come back scrambled or you don’t come back at all.” For good measure I added, “You idiot.”

He waved his hands in fake exasperation. “Hells know where you get your fearfulness and pessimism, certainly isn’t from my side. We’ll be perfectly safe. You forget I’m the foremost curiosopher in the galaxy.”

“I’m going for a nap,” I said. “How horrible to see you again.”

Inside, Tommaron was peeking out from under the stairs, pretending to sleep but clearly listening. I said, “The man out there is a cretin. If he asks, please help him as little as possible.”

Tommaron morphed into something vaguely dog-shaped. “Why didn’t you tell me your father would be visiting?” he whispered excitedly.

“Because had I known he was here, we wouldn’t be.”

I listened from upstairs, my father holding Tommaron hostage with a long and nonsensical story about the time he’d gone into some weird two-dimensional curio with ten other curiosophers and saved each of their lives in turn. The expedition had apparently been so impressed with his bravery they’d decorated him in mineral flowers and renamed the curio in his honour.

This had always been his problem; not the rudeness, not even the pathological lying, but that he fervently believed the only way to make friends was to simply keep talking about himself long enough that any listener would be impressed into liking him. The irony – ignoring one’s audience out of a desperation to be loved by one’s audience.

I went back down a few hours later. He’d fallen asleep and Tommaron was changing his sandals for slippers. “Don’t do that,” I said.

“He’s old…” Tommaron said.

“And you’re mine and I told you not to do that.”

I watched my father sleeping awhile. His mouth hung open and he snored, one hand across his chest like he was giving an impassioned speech, maybe lecturing some poor bastard even in his dreams.

It was one thing to remember all his quirks and stupidities. It was another that, some days, if I was tired or hungover enough, in the mirror I saw him staring out from behind my eyes.

I was peeing when Tommaron called through the door. “Another one for you, will be floating by in two minutes.”

I went running. I reached the river just in time, the sound of awful screams coming around the bend. It was a man, thrashing about like all the others.

I threw in a rope. He grabbed it desperately and pulled himself out. I towelled him off so none of the water got on my skin and told him, “It’s all right. Everything is all right.”

“Like hells it is!”

After a bit more yelling, he finally lay back in the grass with a petrified stare.

“You’re safe,” I said. “That’s very important to know. You’re back where you started, in Sapiens. Tomorrow we’ll find you a ship and get you out of here.”

He met my eyes and was clearly trying not to cry. “I’ve gone mad…” he whispered.

“No, it’s just sublimia, I see it all the time. Do you know your name?” He shook his head. “Well, do you know how you got here?”

On shaking hands, he pushed himself up and looked about at the town, then at the river he’d come down on.

I said, “You were hiking towards the mountain.” I pointed to it there in the far distance, the tip so bright it hurt to look directly at. “Do you remember?”

“A little…”

“But you fell into the river and now you’re safe. We spoke before you set off. You told me your planet’s name. What is it?”

He closed his eyes in muted pain. “Sevasta, I think.”

It’s always good to bring them back with worldly things: pets, family, foods they enjoyed, as close to regular humanity as possible.

“There were wheels,” he said, his voice straining. “And numbers, all of them. The wind and the blue fire and—”

“No, no, we can leave all that behind now. Your hike is over.”

“I was so close…”

“You weren’t. Nothing is up there, just more confusion. But you’re back and you’re safe. Everything is safe here.”

“Everything is safe here,” he repeated flatly. He said it again and again until there was no sense left in the words and he would answer no further questions.

I walked us in silence to the sanatorium. They received him like a broken bicycle and showed him inside.

Tomorrow, slept, he would be better.

When I got back, my father was sitting in the kitchen with Tommaron on his lap. He said, “A splat, was it?”

I said, “Please don’t call them that. Are you going to tell me what in hells you’re *actually* doing here, or shall we just skip to not talking for another ten years?”

He shrugged. “Curios are what I do.”

“I am aware of that since they’re my profession also. But of the thousands of sublimists in the galaxy, I’m unsure why you’d want *me* for whatever this is.”

Say it, I thought. For the gods’ sake just tell me you miss me and you orchestrated this entire stupid contrivance to hang out again.

A little grumble. He jammed a fork into the table and twanged it like a doorstop. “You look well.”

“And you look old,” I said. “Tell me what all this is, else get the hells out. Or better still, just the latter.”

“I need your help.”

“Sure,” I said. “The arsenic is just next to the coffee. Make sure to take enough.”

My father pointed out the window to Big Maybe, the great mountain gleaming in the afternoon, swathed in dancing plumes of crystal light. “I got word a week ago about it all. Someone’s trapped up there, that’s all I know. He won’t go over the peak, but won’t climb down either. They’ve tried everything, it’s no good. Naturally they told me to take a sublimist. I got to thinking about you, the finest sublimist I know.”

“Right,” I said. It was the first compliment I remembered him paying me in ever. Clearly this meant he had ulterior motives.

“I’ll get us through the forest and up the mountain, then you convince him to keep walking.”

I said, “That is literally the opposite of my job. I’m here to rehabilitate people, free them of this transcendence horseshit, not tell them to go further with it all.”

“Then come with me and do that,” my father pleaded. “Convince him it’s all rubbish and I’m sure he’ll walk down instead. But if he stays like that, trapped…”

I rolled my eyes. “If you feel so guilty about your past behaviour, you could’ve just written. ‘Sorry’ or ‘How are you’ would’ve been fine. But if you think I’m joining for one of your inane heists, you must be even more demented than I realised.”

“I haven’t heisted in years,” he said in a defensively high-pitched voice. “I’m straight these days, working for the Symposium.”

“Ah yes, the Symposium, that notoriously reputable organisation with all of our best interests at heart.”

A manifold passed silently over the house; the ridiculous grandeur of ten miniature planets orbiting about a baby universe frozen in time, come to dock at the spaceport. Onboard would be a new rabble of idiots fleeing from the outside universe, convinced Ederlezi was the answer to all their sad and pointless questions.

He gestured to the forest. “Aren’t you curious to step into the belly of the beast you’ve devoted your life to warding everyone off? Don’t you want to see it up close?”

“I spend all day treating people who have *seen it up close*. They’re jellied messes. What kind of help would I be if I ended up *inside* curios, you addled old idiot?”

He said in a child’s imitation of wisdom, “Doesn’t it seem strange to work as a surgeon and never experience getting cut on? What kind of psychoanalyst denies a week of madness if offered? Maybe it would do you good, going inside just this once. It’s not what you think. When they’re strange enough they take everything from you, and you just freely give it all away. Khoteruuri, it’s a gravitic curve on the Eastern Rim. I spent a month inside. There are colours in there you’ve never seen before, dimensions of thought you never recover from.”

“Well you seem fine, save for missing a personality. Or are you riddled with sublimia already?”

“Sublimia,” he murmured. “What a slur of the uneducated. Imagine calling enlightenment *sublimia*. Imagine pathologising it like that, terming a need to commune with the infinite *sublimia*.”

“Not today with your Big Sister bullshit, please,” I said.

“Yes today with my Big Sister bullshit, please. Don’t you think it’s necessary to go and explore these things?”

“Of course I do,” I said. “But clearly they’re dangerous. What about all the broken babbling would’ve-been heroes who come back out barely able to tie their shoes? Try telling *them* sublimia is just a state of mind, you simpleton.”

“Look how your lip curled even at the idea of adventure,” he laughed. “Look how scared you are of anything outside of your narrow little—”

I said, “Go home, really. Go home and spend the rest of your miserable, lonely life getting pickled on cheap beer. Go home to all the medals you made for yourself, all the pretending you have a legacy—”

“I *do* have a legacy…” my father said.

Tommaron added from his lap, “It does sound quite prestigious from what I’ve read.”

“Fuck off,” I said. “Both of you.”

It was a novelty to talk to him like that, the privilege of open rage, knowing he could no longer make me feel stupid or small.

He grumbled some more, then extracted the fork from the table and offered it as a surrender.

I returned it to the drawer.

He said, “I’ll set off for the mountain tomorrow. Won’t you join me, fruit of my loins?”

I said, “If you would like your windpipe intact for the foreseeable future, please don’t ever call me that again. Besides, if there’s someone stuck up there, shouldn’t you be leaving *now*?”

“There’s a temporal effect, some weird time stuff going on the further you walk into Ederlezi. I thought you’d know that.”

“It is my job *not* to know that…”

He shrugged. “Might be a day for us, but only a minute or so for him. We’ve got a while. He’s about your age, not a daft one, travelled lots before. Imagine the torture of it, stuck right on the threshold between here and—”

“What?” I said. “Here and *what*? There *is* no threshold, that’s exactly what sends everyone mad. There’s no big transcendence, no answer to the Wild Everything. You don’t need a sublimist to tell him that. Walk up the damn mountain and deliver the news yourself.”

My father exchanged a glance with Tommaron, then said, “He’ll stay on the peak forever if no one helps, tortured for half an eternity. If you *really* believe in what you’re doing, if you’re such a bleeding heart, are you going to leave him up there?”

“Yes, happily.”

“I’m going in all the same.”

“Oh sure, well off you trot then,” I said.

I fetched his bag and hurled it out the window and felt the best I had in months.

*

They were old when we found them. It was a longsleep expedition craft that took the dubious pleasure of first discovery.

The ship had detected what it thought to be a white hole and automatically changed course to intercept. By the time the crew woke, they were in orbit.

The anomaly neither absorbed nor emitted radiation. It was totally resistant to lasers and masers, indifferent to radio. Well, someone would have to explore inside.

A deckhand volunteered. They gave him a flyer and in he went.

A standard day. Two standard days. By the third, when they were sure he must be dead, he re-emerged as a gabbling madman, yelling of strange stellar navigation techniques and theoretical models for new propulsion.

He couldn’t write it all down fast enough, foregoing food and water and sleep, interested only in his crazed diagrams and formulae.

They found him dead in his cabin four days later, having drunk liquid nitrogen straight from the engines.

It was only when the Symposium scholars went over his notes and realised these were not deranged ravings, but pearls of genius, that the strange little spatial pocket became a point of interest.

This was the first curio. They called it Scientia, the font of knowledge. And of course they sent more folk in.

Their fates were identical: a few days of superhuman creativity, then a desperate longing not to exist. Those who were prevented from ending their lives only sank into silent stupors, never talking again; comatose, unresponsive, burned-out filaments.

There was an endless stream of volunteers, especially since the Symposium never disclosed the fates of those who'd already gone inside. They returned always with just enough surplus creativity for the next innovation, the sequels to the great literary epics, shortly before psychological collapse.

Another curio was discovered fifty years later: Omosin 26. Then Agora soon after that. And Venera and Stringent Ouch and the rest.

Soon enough the existence of these strange objects became impossible to keep contained. The Symposium decriminalised searching for and entering them, as long as the treasures found inside were freely volunteered upon exiting – *if* one exited a curio. Bold exploration was adopted as an official galactic policy. And so began the new galactic era: The Year of Radical Fun.

It is not those who die that I feel for. Rather it is those who don't, who return physically in one piece, but babbling or mute, screaming of worlds beyond comprehension, longing for a sanity they dimly remember but can never now reclaim.

I have seen it justified that all progress is paid for in blood, that the price of enlightenment is sacrifice. It's just always seemed strange to me that those who make such an argument are never the ones volunteering themselves to part with said blood.

*

The next morning I walked to the sanatorium to see the man from the river. He was sitting up in bed drinking tea.

"Do you remember me?" I asked. He smiled apologetically. "No, that's a good thing. It means most of the trauma was forgotten too."

"Of the hike?" he asked.

"That's right. How are you feeling today?"

He examined his hands as though they were new. "Like I've been on a wonderful adventure, but it's almost gone…"

"Waking from a dream," I said.

“Exactly.”

“Well, it wasn’t a wonderful adventure, I’m afraid. You should’ve seen yourself yesterday. You were yelling and screaming.”

“Hm. And did I…” He made a walking motion with two fingers up his arm.

“Reach the peak? Of course not. No one ever does that and comes back.” I saw him retreat into himself a moment, reevaluating. I would sound unkind, but this was the best time to correct these thoughts. “You’re thinking about going back, trying it again.” He nodded sheepishly. I leaned in. “There’s nothing up there. No deliverance, no transcendence, no better world. It is a myth we have told ourselves to momentarily escape from *this* world, where people are ignorant and suffering and dying. If you try going in again, I can’t promise you’ll bring your mind back next time.”

“But the Big Sisters,” he murmured.

“The Big Sisters are dead. They were an offshoot of humanity, a clever one, but just that. They died out the way all civilisations do eventually. What we have is *us*, is *now.* That is where the difference will be made.”

I had practised the little speech on and off for the last few years and thought it wasn’t bad; harsh but direct. Just as with an alcoholic, sometimes it’s best to catch them at their lowest moment.

Tommaron pawed at my leg. *You’re being mean,* he said mentally.

Don’t tell me how to do my job, I replied. *And I won’t tell you how to lie around all day living off the labour of others.*

“What do I do now?” the man said quietly.

“Go home. Go home and live and be decent. Know that this life is the only life you’ll ever have and make it wonderful for that.”

I patted his hand and felt very noble.

Moseying back through Sapiens, my self-satisfaction only grew. Oh the next few months would be difficult for him, a massive reassessment of his foundational beliefs, but then this is how we grow. Soon enough he’d come around to the world again, look at the flowers anew, have the occasional revelation on the toilet and so on.

The house was empty. There was the gash my father had made in the kitchen table with the fork, the slippers he’d left on the porch.

He’d be back from the mountain like all of them in a few days, turned up in the river screaming, unable to remember his name. And then who would

care for him? Not me.

I made a gin and tonic and sat out on the porch and watched Big Maybe.

Planet-dwellers were usually horrified by the sight at first. In the far distance, beyond the forest, towering thousands of feet above: a stark mountain with a white snowy cap. And at the tip of the cap, a blazing explosion of star fire that, to my eyes, was the very opposite of an invitation.

I believe it is the almost-familiarity that scares visitors from the outside universe. Most who come in here are curiosophers after all, it's not like they're new to Big Sister weirdness. But curios are usually alien, strange in ways that defy sight and sense. Ederlezi appears too real, conjures memories of ancient children's stories; a verdant forest and the witches and monsters that await one inside. Big Maybe too, it appears nothing more than a mountain with a shining top. How could something so picturesque hold such a reputation for sending even hardened minds into recoverless terror?

Well, they all find out eventually.

Tommaron appeared as a cat and crawled up onto my lap and I stroked the side of his chin. He said, "The house told me your father set off hours ago."

"Ah-ha."

"How far do you think he's gotten?"

"It takes a few days to reach the mountain," I said. "Then a few more to climb it. Plus he's old. If he reaches it at all, he still has a week left."

"Will be very lonely out there by himself…"

"Well, why don't you go and join him if you're so bloody concerned?"

Would Tommaron be affected by it all, I wondered? Whatever mechanism made up his weird little mind, would Big Maybe work its same horrid curse on him as it did on us meat computers?

Oh, who cared.

I looked out beyond the meadow to Sapiens. Two drunks were stumbling out of the bar shack, leaning against each other in a precarious balancing act. A woman was wearing a force field and throwing herself into walls for the fun of it. Behind all that was the makeshift town: the meeting hall, the mentality shops, the markets, and the Sublimists' College where I'd spent so many years trying to listen to lectures and only staring out the window

instead. Smog hung above it all, too light to fall to the ground, apparently too attached to its brooding that it couldn't quite leave either.

The gin hit nicely and I napped, down into the murk of anti-obligation.

It was restful, no name, no history – just being and being.

This was the purest form of living, I was sure of it, the one we are all trying to return to through introspection and orgasm, buttered toast and war.

If I could live like this forever, some part of me said - if I could—

I heard a shriek, a familiar one, rasping and high-pitched, embarrassed at itself. I started up.

"What is it?" Tommaron asked, his claws in my trousers and clinging to me then.

"My father, he's in the river already."

"You were dreaming. The detector didn't go off, I'd know."

"I'm sure I heard him. Maybe you're dysfunctional today."

"I am literally composed of tiny sentient cosmoses. My perception is divine, thank you."

I reached out mentally for the house systems and queried them. Tommaron was right; no one had come down on the river.

I tried to drift off again, but everything was a knife. The light was too bright and the chair was digging into my arse.

The thought kept coming now: he will be back and I'll have to look after him.

"All alone out there…" Tommaron murmured. "Poor old man by himself…"

"Would you shut up?" I barked. "He knew what he was getting into."

"Did he though?"

Did he though.

Other curios slowed the speed of light or played with gravity, or even broke the mind. They were exotic certainly, but only inasmuch as a bad hallucinogenic trip. From what I'd seen of the people who had survived it ('survived' being a generous word), climbing Big Maybe changed something fundamental on the inside; mangled a person's model of reality in a way they never recovered from, instilled a sense that there really *was* a greater beyond and we were all less for not attaining it. They brought that back with them. Even if they recovered, even if they relearned to flush the toilet and change their bedsheets, they never quite seemed to forget the pull of the promise of a better world and their inability to achieve it. And those

were just the ones who came back at all. When it’s fruitless, hope is far worse than despair.

“Not knowing where he’s going…” Tommaron sang. “Your father *allllllll* alone…”

“Oh hells,” I said.

*

So it was that curiosophy became a field of study, if one can call it that.

Volunteers were usefully expendable, but eventually someone noticed that actual trained professionals fared better inside curios.

I suppose when humans started leaving the first world in rockets, they must have selected for those individuals who could stay clever under pressure. Curios demanded instead those who remained unimpressed with astonishment; men and women who could walk in fractal nightmares and at most need only a sandwich and a spot of therapy afterwards. And what horrors each curiosopher was asked to face.

Abnago for example, a seemingly standard-looking oxygen-rich planet. Beyond normal appearances though it only let a single occupant down at a time, shooing any surplus craft away via some impossible atmospheric barrier. Sometimes curiosophers never returned to orbit, their beacons registering them as dead. Other times they made it back having aged two hundred years in a week, or now with twenty eyes all about their body. No reason for these curses was ever ascertained.

Then there was Garistri, a region of space that seemed to reveal the ultimate truth of things to all those who passed through it, only robbing them of their language at the same time, and so explaining their revelation was impossible. Perfect torture by any measure.

But it was a two-foot by two-foot shack that caused the most fuss.

On Sumatra, a barren world at the edge of the rim, was a small wooden structure with an iron door on its front. It looked completely unremarkable, the sort of thing one built in a garden to house trowels and shovels. Only, the door would not open and the walls were totally impervious to damage.

Physicists tried their scanners, but it was opaque to all radiation.

Militarists tried digging under, bombarding it from orbit, anything to get inside, but the shack didn’t register a scratch.

It was Amides, the celebrity curiosopher, who thought to knock on the door.

The door opened.

Waiting on the floor in perfect condition was his wedding ring, the one he'd lost on a world light years distant.

More expeditionists knocked then. They were presented with their own strange gifts: dictionaries for languages they had been trying to decipher for decades, mathematical solutions to millennia-old puzzles. Nothing short of miracles. But then as always with curios, the dark nature of the miracles became apparent.

The trick only worked once per person. The door would not open if knocked on again by the same knuckles. The shack was very strict about this. Well, so what? A miracle is a miracle.

At first the Symposium marketed Sumatra as a sort of spiritual vacation, an attempt to lift galactic morale, cleverly bringing in fresh volunteers to reveal more about how the trick worked. And, sure enough, more folk came in search of whatever they'd been most deprived of all their lives. But slowly, as small towns built up around the curio, the excitement turned to despair.

A genie was one thing, but if you couldn't specify the wish, and the wish was only granted *once*…

The despair turned to rage.

Who was this damn shack to tell me what I needed and what I didn't? What if I had spent all my savings trying to reach Sumatra in the hope I would become rich, knocked on the door, and found only a little book inside expounding on the nobility of poverty?

The surrounding towns fell into violence; tens, then hundreds dead in the riots.

Next the attending academics began to lose their minds, convinced that if they only deciphered the secret, then they might receive as many wishes as they pleased.

This was just as fruitless.

Finally the sky was all fire, the orbital habitats descending into anarchy and crashing through the atmosphere, razing the parks and houses to the ground.

Only the shack remained.

The mind can accept a lack. It cannot however accept a lack with a solution just out of reach.

This leads inevitably, as all curios do, to sublimia. And as much as I hope we eradicate the disease one day, a man must pay his bills on occasion, and so I thank it for my continued employment.

*

My father was sitting on a rock when I found him, not even so far down the path. He watched me catching my breath and said, “Changed your mind? I’m so glad.”

“One in fifty,” I said. “That’s how many actually make it back from the mountain. One in *fifty*.”

“I try not to think of myself as a statistic. Makes a person feel little, you know?”

“Oh gods,” I shouted. “I think you’re a bastard, beyond respect. In fact I’d say I don’t like you very much at all.” He nodded enthusiastically. “But I don’t want to watch you turn your mind into slurry. I’ve seen them, the worst of it – the empty eyes, the screaming. I’m begging you not to do that to yourself. Just think it over for a week. You can live at my place even, if you promise to shut up the whole time. I’m sure the trapped climber will find his own way down.”

“But he won’t,” my father said.

“Then leave him.”

“Nope.”

“Oh, you’re a lunatic.”

“Possibly. Shall we get going?”

“Hells no.”

He produced a second backpack and said, “Then I suppose this will go to waste. Besides, I’m not turning around, so we’re in quite the quandary.”

“It does seem like a bit of a quandary to be fair,” Tommaron agreed.

I said, “Gods, you were waiting for me, you scheming prick.”

“Obviously, yes,” my father said.

I turned back to Sapiens, maybe a mile back down the hill now, all wooden houses and markets, all quiet dilapidation. I said, “You know you’ll just end up back there, don’t you, in the river?”

“Sure, but what a time we’ll have before then.”

He threw the backpack over.

It was such outrageous manipulation, but his greatest skill was stubbornness, and in the time we'd been apart he'd clearly only gotten better at it.

"Truly you're an arse," I said and put the backpack on, hardly believing how easily I'd been snared.

Well fine, I thought. I'd walk with him long enough to make all the usual arguments, and if he *still* didn't relent then the responsibility was no longer mine. And when he turned up in the river he could save his own bloody self, couldn't he.

We set off. My father walked hunched but strident, making up with arrogance what he lacked in physical ability. "Do you know where we're going?" I asked.

"Generally, no. Specifically, also no."

"What an omen of good fortune."

He mumbled, "You never had a tolerance for uncertainty…"

"And whose fault is that?"

We reached the lip of the forest. I saw a painted white blaze on a tree, a simple little drawing of a geometric eye: the beginning of the trail. I pretended to check my laces, hesitating. My father said, "You just keep walking. That's all there is to it."

"Easy for you to say, your mind's already gone."

It looked dark in the trees, murk and gloom, evening during the day.

My father said, "There's a man trapped on the mountain, remember that. We do this for him."

"When did you ever do *anything* that wasn't for yourself?"

"Does my motive matter here? A good deed is a good deed."

"Oh, and isn't your life a catalogue of them…"

Tommaron morphed into a little mouse and scurried up to perch on my shoulder. He whispered into my ear the most irritating line of the Sublimists' Oath: "First undo all harm."

I said, "How do you know when it's all too much, when you should turn back?"

My father's face fell serious for a moment and he said, "When you stop being scared. You step inside one of these things never quite sure what's waiting for you. Sometimes there's a strange fragrance. Sometimes light bends in the wrong directions. Sometimes you're confronted by the living

ghost of a lost love made flesh, only missing their skin or talking backwards. It's always terrifying, and if ever you find yourself getting used to it, if ever you notice you've stopped being scared, that means your mind is going. That means you turn back, else you're already dead."

"Are you scared now?"

"Petrified as always," he said cheerily.

We stepped into the trees.

*

As with each era of the Symposium, the Year of Radical Fun turned out to be rather ironically branded. It's true that the occasional curio is harmless, mildly nice even, but most are simply hellish.

It is not that they turn a curiosopher inside out, put their guts on their head or something – though several do. Rather, they present a reality so odd that the mind simply cannot comprehend it, forcing an individual to either shut the world out, or fully embrace it and thereby go insane.

Worse, like all Big Sister technology, it does not matter how clever the mathematicians and metaphysicists are who end up assigned to these things. The only commonality each curio shares is a total unwillingness to divulge its workings. The brave go mad and the clever come away terminally frustrated. There is no picnic in the infinite.

The birth of sublimism as a field was quite natural then; a sort of awkward meeting of psychology, philosophy, and a disappointed parent dispensing hard to swallow truths. Someone had to take care of the addled curiosophers anyway.

You might expect that training as a sublimist involves years of learning about the curios themselves. It is quite the opposite. Sublimists do not go into curios, and so they should learn as little about them as possible. Ignorance is the secret of our endurance. One sticks as fervently as possible to the baseline boring facts of the world – cramps, ageing, tooth cavities etc. – so that even when presented with stories of strange apparitions and geometric horrors, a roll of the eyes and a casual exit is always possible.

If you've ever wanted to waste an evening, pair a curiosopher and a sublimist and watch from a safe distance with a drink. The dynamic is always the same. The curiosopher will usually admit that no progress has been made in understanding Big Sister technology or culture in millennia of

trying. Then in the same breath they will insist though that the *next* curio will reveal something world-shattering, will allow *final* insight into the workings of nature; we must simply keep going.

The sublimist will sit and nod and perhaps even smile a bit, having spent the last few decades actually dealing with the tortured minds that emerge from curios, knowing nothing waits in there but agony and destruction, and finally raise a clinical eyebrow and say, “And how does all this make you feel?”

I have been to the vaulted halls of curiosophy departments. They are filled with colossal statues reaching for the heavens.

Visit a sublimists’ college instead and you will find that the ceilings are low and the coffee is weak and if there are any statues at all, they are of mice and badgers and modest creatures that know to keep small, and quiet, and hidden well out of sight of the terrible meaning of things.

*

Two hours in and the trail began to snake alongside the great river. I listened to the water gurgling, for lack of any other distraction.

I was already sore and tired. My father was doing his usual galumph-galumph stumbles, but with incredible stamina. Only then did it occur to me he must have hiked back down through the forest to come bother me in Sapiens – perhaps a two-day journey from wherever he was stationed. Even in old age he was irrepressible.

“The bounty is bigger than ever these days,” he was saying to Tommaron. “Even just for bringing back a little useful technology, a new alloy or something, a person could secure all the fame they’d need for a lifetime.”

I said, “And what good did any of that do you? Whatever came out of these stupid adventures into curios besides a few ridiculous stories?”

My father didn’t reply. Rather, he held up his hand. It vanished, and reappeared to tap me on my shoulder, emerging right out of the air.

“Cheap hyper-geometrical tricks…” I said. Every sublimist was shown this kind of stuff in their first years of training.

He shrugged. “Well, I know you keep a birthday card from your mother and me in your bedside drawer, and take it out once a year to read to yourself.”

“You searched through the house.”

“I really didn’t,” he said, and I knew this to be true; the house would’ve told me.

“Mind reading then?”

He shook his head and tapped his temple. “Prescience.”

“*Prescience*,” I said in a dumb parody of his voice.

“Tell you what. Think of a word, any word, the longer the better.”

“Can I have two? How’s *piss off*?”

“I think that works,” he agreed and gestured to a tree. I circled around it. Clearly carved into its backside were the words: *piss off*.

“How did you do that?” I said, trying to stay calm.

“Well, it isn’t useful apparently so why would you care?”

I fingered the carving. It was a real indentation, not a projection.

Perhaps he’d planted the words in my head subconsciously the day before.

Perhaps he’d affected me bio-mentally, gone into my brainstem so I only hallucinated the words in the bark.

Or perhaps something beyond comprehension was at work here.

I felt horror rising in me; a hot tingle on the back of my neck, a slight breathlessness – the visceral sense that the floor was about to be removed and all the abyssal hells would be waiting beneath.

I repeated the mantra under my breath that had always kept me safe: *Nothing is magic, not even magic itself.*

The fear began to abate.

“A touch of the Big Sister woo-woos?” my father said. “Can’t have our resident shrink catching the very disease he’s devoted to curing.”

“Really, how did you do that to the tree?”

He continued walking.

“In *all your years*,” I said, trying not to shout, “you honestly never felt it? With everything you say you’ve seen, sublimia never got you once?”

“Honestly, no.”

“How?”

“Because I don’t fight it. Your problem is that’s all you do.”

I left a suitably angry distance between us. My father was simply too boring to be astonished, I decided.

We walked for hours in silence, Tommaron as a monkey swinging through the trees above, my father trudging ahead, hacking at branches with his machete.

To know this bastard's genes were in me; to know I was made of him and his ego, his faults and false certainties and all, it was disgusting. Friends were the family one chose. Family was often the enemies one had no choice in making.

Evening began to come on, the woods falling into unsettling twilight. I looked up to the constellations and swore they appeared a little different, the head of Vion far too spread out at the front.

"The stars…" I said.

"Yes?" my father purred.

Tommaron said, "Their positions have changed."

"Is it something atmospheric?" I asked.

"Ederlezi has no atmosphere, not really," my father countered.

"Then what's doing it?"

"Duration," he said, as though it were so obvious he could barely enact the labour of explaining.

I saw then it wasn't just random stars that had wandered out of alignment. They had all shifted uniformly.

"Another of your tricks?" I said.

He shook his head and hacked at the trees.

We rounded a bend and I spied a woman dipping her toes into the great river.

"What are you doing?" I shouted.

She looked back up at us with no urgency and replied, "Washing our feet, thank you."

"Oh gods, don't!" I scrambled down the hill.

"We were just playing. Strange, the day is suddenly a blur," she said.

"Yes, that's the water. It has amnesiac properties." I offered my hand. "Please." Reluctantly she took it and stepped out.

She was old as time, wrinkles in wrinkles, thin and wizened.

My father bowed pompously. "Madam," he said.

She struck herself on the head several times, then bowed back to us with a wry smile. "Are you gentlemen lost?"

"No more than usual," my father said. "I think my son is right, it might not be such a good idea putting your foot in there."

“Oh, to forget just a little…” she murmured. “It’s quite pleasant. How does it work, do you know?”

I said, “We don’t. But if you stay in contact with it for too long, it’ll ruin your memory completely. You won’t even recall coming into the woods.”

She said, “A clever technology, that. We’re sure there’s plenty we could all do with forgetting.” Then she muttered something under her breath, hard and angry, and walloped herself on the head again.

She’s old… Tommaron said mentally to me.

Revelatory, I thought back. *I would never have noticed.*

No, she’s very *old, more than centuries even. Her radiation footprint is from millennia back.*

Gently I said aloud, “Do you know your name?”

She threw back her head with a cackle, said, “He thinks we’re mad! We are no strangers to sublimia, thank you. Keep your pathologies to yourself.”

My father shot me a sympathetic look and said, “We were just getting ready to camp for the evening. Care to join us?”

And just as I was about to protest that she might like to be alone, she agreed.

We found a spot on a hill overlooking a valley. Down in the valley was a town, its lights sparkling blue and white, drunken calls from the bars echoing all the way out to us.

My father set up his yurt while Tommaron unfurled mine and fussed with the straps. The woman had no shelter, only unrolled a sleeping mat and joined us at the fire. We roasted jalili fruit and my father produced some beer and we drank.

The fire made canyons of the woman’s wrinkles and craters of her eyes. I said, “Can I ask where you’re coming from?”

“Before your time,” she said.

“Yet you shine radiantly, madam,” my father crooned.

She muttered furiously to herself again.

“Are you going up or coming down?” my father asked.

“Oh, coming down, home bound. We almost got to the peak but that was all our sanity could take.”

“*Our*?” I said.

She produced a pipe and began packing it. “We are all plural things, collections of cells resting upon universes of atoms suspended in a zoo of

spacetime loops. We contain perhaps multitudes of minds, oceans of wills."

"Right," I said. "Yeah."

We watched the fire crackle to itself. Distantly came the call of some wild animal surely hungering for our eyeballs.

I noticed a strange leaning inside me. Weren't wild animals allowed to eat too? They hadn't chosen to be carnivores any more than wasps had chosen to be sadistic pricks; it was simply in their nature. That wasn't to say I'd be offering myself up to the woodland murder bears (or whatever was stalking us through the trees) but I could at least see their point of view all of a sudden.

"May we ask what inspired this hike?" my father said.

The old woman blew smoke up among the strange shifted stars. She said, "We have visited all the curios, been to their tops and bottoms, seen all one may of things beyond reason." She cast an eye over to Big Maybe. "Seemed fitting to save the best for last."

I said, "You've seen *all* of the curios? There are what – five thousand?"

"Five thousand and eleven," she corrected.

"And spread across hundreds of light years."

"If you keep implying we're ancient, we might start taking offence."

"No," I mumbled. "Sorry, right…"

"Are you a curiosopher like myself?" my father asked, trying to recover the calm.

"A sociographer, thank you," she said.

What in hells is that? I asked Tommaron mentally.

Screwed if I know, he replied.

My father either hid his scepticism or was too unimaginative to muster any, and said, "What an honour then. I've never come across one."

Because they never existed… Tommaron said in my mind.

"They most certainly did," the old woman snapped at Tommaron, intercepting his thoughts somehow. "We were once held in high regard, fancy parties and awards and everything."

"Is that something you might tell us of then?" my father said.

"You'll forgive us if we're more interested in the future than the past these days."

"Understandable." My father bowed once again and offered his hand. "Athuriad, itinerant curiosopher, and this is my son Bernardo, a sublimist of constant scepticism."

“Majister Gwendolyn-Erdo,” she intoned.

My father started back like someone had just shat in his beer. “Truly?”

“Truly.”

Are we supposed to know who that is? I asked Tommaron.

Erdo and Gwendolyn, the original expeditionists… But she can’t be.

Though somehow, staring at her ancient face, I knew she was telling the truth. The years, the centuries, seemed to seep out of her across the campfire, until my life felt a blink by comparison. So too I looked to my father and saw not only his age, but felt it – his complications, his mistakes, all the decades of fumbling in the dark for some little scrap of the absolute. I was fugged with time and sads.

Have I been poisoned or bitten by something? I asked Tommaron.

No, but I feel it too…

My father produced more beer and we drank until it was gone. The old woman brought out some kind of melon-based cocktail, utterly disgusting but very high in alcoholic strength, and we drank *that* until it was gone. On finishing the third cup, I realised I was gone also.

She talked of life before the exodus into Big Sister space, of a pre-heroic Symposium when fear had presided over all things. She told us of Duma, of Majister Erdo, of how Ubiq had been rediscovered and proliferated across the galaxy as the common tongue.

She said, “We wish you could know how hopeful we were then. Funny to see how it all shook out.” She nodded to my father. “Your profession would’ve meant execution in those times.”

My father seemed to like that.

He talked next, endlessly of course, of his adventures and heists inside curios, retrieving artifacts, slaying monsters that probably didn’t exist and so on.

He turned to me and said fondly, “And now my son slays other monsters entirely, the inner kind. How proud of him I am for that.”

His fatherly pride washed over me, an all-encompassing field of it, the desperate joy of loving something you made and raised.

My contempt soon dried all that to sand. The bastard. His gushing was twenty years too late.

He wore a pained expression suddenly as though I’d said any of this aloud. Only, I knew he didn’t use neuralisis, couldn’t possibly read my

thoughts – curiosophers considered all of that a liability, the risk of sharing sublimia was far too dangerous.

“It’s all right,” he said, as though trying to talk me down. “Just take it easy, it’s all right.”

I wanted to smack the cup out of his hand. I wanted to spit in his face.

I excused myself and went to bed.

The yurt was warm and the ground was soft and I dreamt of nothing and it was fine.

*

I choose to believe the curios harm us inasmuch as a child might put their hand in a fire. The fire was not to blame really, and it certainly meant no injury. But the burn is incurred all the same.

I suppose after several generations of being ravaged by these strange objects, the curiosophers thought they’d seen all they could. They had named and visited each curio in turn, published papers, argued drunk into the nights about mechanisms and motives. Despite still really knowing nothing about them, they were certain each flavour of terror had been categorised at least.

I was fourteen when the signal came.

My family and I lived on a small world near the rim, just a few light years from an epistemic curio my father vanished off to now and then for ‘research’. My earliest memories are of him appearing at the front door after months away inside it, his hair grown to his shoulders, his mouth whispering nonsense, his fingers in a spasm as though reaching for something just slightly too distant. My mother would rush him to bed and spend the next few weeks on rehabilitation duty with tea and soup. Then on a random day he’d come down to the garden in apparently good spirits, accusing my mother of being an overbearing worrier, and tell my sister and I of the strange things he’d seen on his last expedition. But I spied a deadness behind his eyes that only increased each time he returned; a weariness with the world of actual things, as though this life was an unwelcome chore. I suspected there was a strong chance that the next time he set off he may well never come back, even if his body did.

I remember being quite young, creeping into his study while he was away. It was like the tomb of some ethereal being, artifacts festooned on

shelves and in display cases – impossible machines, geometric spindizzies, the spoils of his labour. I could not believe that this other realm had been hiding behind a wooden door the whole time; the scattered mysteries of a great and now dead race.

I played with those artifacts for a while, knowing not to try and read sense into anything; he'd taught me that much of curiosophy at least. Then I found his journal. Most of it was comprehensible, usually written in transit to curios. A few pages later, upon his arrival at wherever he was bound, and his writing began to lapse into loops and scrawls, deranged sketches of himself as a winged centaur or a puddle of slime, or only *Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods*, scribbled over and over.

Finally I noticed the stack of parchment on his desk. Back then the Symposium still had an air of pomposity in all its dealings, and thought it cute to send official communications *physically* for gods know why.

The stack was at least half an arm high and each letter read in the same warm and apologetic tone to the effect of:

Dear Sir. Whilst we appreciate your bravery in bringing us these relics and theories, we regret to report that so-and-so curiosopher has already done the majority of the work and your efforts were useless and shit.

This was his life. An archive of polite no-thank-yous for having been pipped to the post time and time again. The real exploration was over decades before. He had been born far too late for the legacy he so desperately desired.

It was disgusting to me, like watching a child drawing the same little crayoned house over and over and having to pretend it was high art. But he wasn't a child, he was our father, and I had only now realised we were mere accessories in his indefatigable quest for a pat on the head.

Years later, my sister and I were in the garden when we heard a scream that rang out through the house. We went running inside, my mother breathless and downstairs too by then. My father was on his knees next to the longbeam radio, his eyes wide, playing the broadcast on repeat.

The message had been delivered on every frequency to every world simultaneously. And what it said, in every possible language, was, "Here, over here!"

The Symposium saw no sense in covering it up, what would've been the point? They admitted the details publicly and at once. No known

technology could broadcast like that, not instantaneously, not as though distance ceased to matter.

Contained inside the signal were spacetime coordinates pointing to a patch of Big Sister space, far out beyond any areas so far explored. Previous long-distance surveys of the region had turned nothing up but dust. For the next twenty years though, it was all anyone would talk about.

My father was no exception. This was oil fields for the ancients. This was bread in the famine.

My mother put her foot down. We had a home, we had lives, there was no way in hells my father would be taking us all off on what could well be a fatal adventure.

Instead he spent the next year sourly listening to the radio. Several curiosophers travelled to the coordinates, of course. They never reported in.

More were sent. Only a single communication made its way back to the Symposium hub, from a young trainee. He explained that he had no memory of what he'd seen in there, but wished he'd never been inside. He was never heard from again.

To a functional mind, these events spelled nothing but disaster. To my father and his insatiable ego, it was the siren call of promised greatness, and no earthly thing could convince him otherwise.

*

My father was asleep on the ground by the campfire when I woke. I prodded him awake. He clutched his head in the usual hungover posture.

I said, "Tommaron can fix that for you."

"No, I like it. Keeps you centred."

"Right."

The old woman had already broken camp.

Tommaron collapsed my yurt, made us toast, and we set off in silence. I wouldn't have admitted this to my father, but it really wasn't so bad out in the forest. The rhythmic clomp of our boots on the path, the pure air, the occasional bird coming to say hello – very agreeable. Though I knew what was waiting at the end of all this. I saw it shining through the trees now and then, that burning white sun of addlement on top of Big Maybe.

"Clever old thing our friend last night, no?" my father said.

"Yup."

“Wouldn’t think she was so ancient just looking at her.”

The woman was a liar of course. No one could still have been alive since before the exodus. That was – how long? I reached into Tommaron’s mind for the calculation. Accounting for how long the initial journey must’ve taken to reach Big Sister space via behethans, and if we said a colony took fifty years to establish on each world, and knowing we were a few hundred light years beyond *that* now – about fifty millennia?

Then again, what if she *was* that old? Shouldn’t she be allowed a little eccentricity?

I watched my father’s strange gait, left foot, right foot, a wobble. He was old too of course. Shouldn’t he be allowed a little eccentricity as well?

No, the thought of offering him any good will was so disgusting, so shameful; I threw it back into the mental cellar. The neglect, the unkindness of my childhood – how could I even consider seeing things from his stupid position? And yet I could feel it now, almost like wanting to stretch a hand out in surrender; there was a foreign kindness in me, the same as the night before. I did not like it.

I realised I’d stopped walking. My father was staring at me. His eyes, they were so alien yet so familiar, boyish blue all the way in, like he was still just a child.

I said, “Are you feeling quite normal on the inside? I think I’m getting sick.”

“We’re all a little different now.”

“What’s happening?”

“You’ll see.”

“I would like to *see* now, please.”

“Lunch first,” he said, and pointed through the trees. There was the town from the night before. The thought of a shower and a beer was quite appealing.

We hiked down into the valley, Tommaron zipping about above as a kestrel.

My father asked, “Have you thought about letting him free?”

“Who?” I said. Then realising he meant Tommaron, I burst out laughing. “*Free*? The little thing has the life of a king, sitting around doing whatever he wants, whenever he wants.”

“Except when you order him to serve you.”

“Oh come off it…”

“Look. Either he’s a slave, in which case he doesn’t need a name and there’s no reason to treat him like a friend, or he *isn’t* a slave and deserves his own life. You need to make your mind up about that some time.”

“I really don’t,” I muttered. The smugness of these bleeding-heart types.

At the bottom finally, the two us sweating and out of breath, a wooden sign decorated in little flowers read: *Lucent Reach.*

Families and hikers were out on porches drinking, playing cards, smiling in the sun. They waved delightedly to us, shouting welcome in odd dialects of Ubiq.

It was gross at first, all this blowing smoke up one’s butt. But soon enough something in me watched that reaction and patted its shoulder and gave it a hug.

I began to feel immeasurably lighter. Perhaps these people had no motives. Perhaps they were kind, or simply happy to see us.

The architecture was almost alien, and certainly not of any sensible style. The houses and official buildings were completely unique, as though built from different eras; meta-brutalist, Doric, and little wooden huts.

We stopped at the first drinking hole we found, a tavern with no name. My father returned from the bar with beers and we both enjoyed those very much.

“Have you given some thought to how you’ll get him down?” he asked, nodding to the mountain.

“Telling them they’re being a bloody idiot usually helps.”

“Oh, come on.” He kept his gaze on me, unwavering.

I said, “There’s only one way, works with all of them. You remember Tilly?”

“Our cat?”

“Yes. She had some surgery done one summer while you were away. They made her wear one of those stupid cones so she couldn’t nibble the stitches out. Well, I woke up and found her stuck trying to get into her little cat house on the shelf. She didn’t understand the cone was too big for the entrance, so she was just perched there, trapped, back paws in the air, front paws clinging on for life.”

“It’s a cute metaphor but I’m not sure it applies to our climber.”

“No, it applies to *all* of them,” I said. “Each idiot goes into a curio thinking they can outsmart it, believing chutzpah and determination can make up for a lack of foreknowledge. But whatever they find in there is

always too big for them, and they can't turn around. They end up trapped in their minds between a life behind them they think is too boring to endure, and a 'transcendent' truth in front of them that's too advanced to comprehend."

"And what does my sublimist son say to do about that?"

"You take the cat off the shelf," I said. "You put nice things for them on the floor, food and toys and all that. You convince them that the cave of truth up there looks attractive, yes, but there are no fish or balls of string inside. There's nothing wrong with living on the floor." He raised a doubting eyebrow, muttered something dismissive. I snapped with, "Maybe if you'd spent a little more time on the floor with, you know, your family, rather than gallivanting off in search of fame and glory on the shelf, Decima and I wouldn't despise you quite so much."

The sentence hadn't ended like that in my head. He gave a little nod and his expression went flat. Bringing my sister into all this, it was gross.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know where that came from."

"It's all right."

"You were just away a lot."

"I know," he said. "Awful of me really." I checked his expression for some hint of irony and saw none. It was a good act.

We drank in silence awhile, then I said, "Where have you been the last few years anyway?"

"Here and there in the forest, moving from town to town."

"Research?"

"Something like that."

I said, "And where is Decima? Last I heard she was living at some research post a few miles down the trail, stuck on a metaphysics problem."

"Decima is up ahead. She's been waiting for you to visit a long time now."

"Is she with Mum?"

"Yes."

The bar filled up, became a mass of sweaty bodies; hikers, academics, curiosophers, and five-legged eight-eyed genetic oddballs.

People came over to shake our hands, wish us luck on our hike. Others bunched in corners with their friends and cried or laughed or only listened to stories with wide eyes and unhesitating smiles.

It felt good to sit among the kindness, a coming home.

I said, “There’s something in the water here. Everyone is far too pleasant.”

“There’s something in the *air*,” my father said.

Sensing he’d had his fun playing coy all this time, I tried, “So there’s some effect to walking through the forest?”

“Yes.”

“Something mental, telepathic?”

He shrugged in a mockery of ignorance.

I thought of the myth of Metodi millennia back, one of the first curios to be discovered; an entire planet covered in an ocean of empathy. Was this some similar mechanism? If it was modifying consciousness, then it must be so far in advance of anything we could understand that…

Nothing is magic, not even magic itself.

“How’s Mum?” I asked, trying to centre myself.

“She misses you.”

“I miss her,” I said, and realised I meant it.

“I shouldn’t have sprung all this on you, bringing you up here. Your mother wouldn’t approve. It was a mean trick.”

“Yeah, it was.”

He said, “But would you have come if I’d written instead?”

“No.”

“Well then.”

His eyes were boyish again, fearful and hopeful.

What if, honestly, as far as he was concerned, he’d been trying his best all these years? What if our parents were only human?

A woman paused at our table.

“Open?” she said.

“Sorry?” I replied.

“Open?” She pointed to the empty chair.

“Yes open, of course.”

She certainly looked human, but her mannerisms were extremely odd, her whole body seeming to glide through the air. She sat and placed a green drink on the table and followed it with a large ceramic cylinder.

She said, “Formally gratified and much obliged for this co-creation.”

“Lovely to meet you also,” my father said and bowed. In solidarity I did the same. “Do you live in Lucent Reach?”

“No, swimming,” she said, as though that meant anything.

“Oh wonderful, us as well. Are you going all the way to…” My father gestured to the mountain.

“No, I empty. Nice place to empty.” She offered the cylinder. I looked inside. It was just ash in there. I was going to sniff the contents when she said, “Old friend. Expired.”

I sealed the cylinder back up and thanked the gods for the warning. “I’m sorry for your loss,” I said.

“I’m sorry for my loss,” she said and finished her drink. “Such is the custom that you require more?” She pointed to our empty glasses.

“We require more, thank you.”

She floated off to the bar. I said, “She’s mad, yes?”

“No, she’s swimming, she told you.”

“And you’re mad too, yes?”

We watched her waiting there with the other customers. Her head swayed in a daze; her fingers undulated like seaweed. My father said, “You don’t know a thing about Ederlezi, do you? Baseline humans aren’t the only visitors.”

“Yeah, I spotted some genetic strangeness going on.”

He said, “Stranger than that,” and swooshed his hands like little flippers.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“A *behethan*?”

“Why not?”

“But she looks human…”

“To us, yes. I’m sure we look like behethans to her,” my father said. “Don’t be speciesist, you ignoramus. Ederlezi shows you the side of itself it thinks you’ll understand.”

We drank with her for several hours until my father and I were beginning to slur. She gave away hints of her life in a nebula somewhere, scientists studying a Big Sister machine, but would tell us no specifics.

“We must seem very strange to you,” I said, the booze making me confidently rude.

She said, “Yes, but I live with your sort for a while. Knowledge of your strange ways. I have come for one of your strange ways.”

“And what strange way is that?”

“I show. You come?”

We finished our drinks and walked out through the town, past the smiling faces and wishes of good health. She took us beyond the shops and restaurants, and finally to the outskirts. There was a pond and a huge wooden wall on the shore that people had pinned paper notes to, from its base to its top.

Adra, one said. *Will remember you for as long as I live.*

And another: *Not a day goes by when we don't miss you.*

And another: *Couldn't stand you when you were alive. But you being gone is worse.*

They flapped in the wind like sad tongues. All these goodbyes and little funerals.

I read some at random for a while trying not to lose it. Most of them were so gentle. They didn't rage at death, didn't seem to resent the universe for taking these children and spouses. The authors were just happy they could've known their loved ones for a little while at all.

One near the base caught my eye. It was penned in handwriting rather similar to my own rushed squiggles. *I was so angry. Now I just wish I'd spent the time loving you instead.*

I went to unpin the note, but my father softly took my wrist and pulled it back. He said, "We shouldn't interfere."

"I just want a closer look."

"This is a complicated place."

Our slightly strange friend was standing at the pond's shore. We joined her. She opened the cylinder and tipped it slightly and said, "Like this?"

"To say goodbye?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then like that, sure."

She emptied the ashes into the wind and they settled on the water. "Good mouse," she said. "Asked silly questions, legs on top. I cry now?"

"If you'd like to."

Tears rolled down her cheeks and she stayed perfectly silent, like a god who'd heard of heartache but never quite tried it out for themselves.

We stood with her in her grief. Surely it was washing over my father just as it was me; the sense of longing to see a lost pet once again. Gods, how did they all live like this here, sharing every hurt and joy in real time?

We watched the ashes dissipate. She dried her face and said, "Why is there still pain?"

My father said, “That lasts a little while longer, I’m afraid. But eventually it will all just be memories; things you can look back on and be ever so glad they happened.”

She nodded formally. “Strange in here, all strange.”

“Ederlezi is very odd,” I agreed.

“No.” She tapped her head. “Strange in *here*.”

“Oh yes. I think everyone feels the same sometimes.”

“I thank you for your instruction. I thank you for this co-creation. I return now.”

“We thank you too,” my father said. “You’ll feel better soon, promise.”

She performed some kind of dance for us, her hands flapping, her shoulders twisting. And with that she walked back to the town, perhaps back to the trail, then presumably back to her nebula, and was gone.

*

He worked on my mother for a year. I only heard the overspill of it, muted arguments from the kitchen, but slowly her tone turned from resolute to uncertain, to defeated. By the time they both broke the news to Decima and I, we had no energy left to feign surprise.

We could stay behind if we wanted, they explained, go live with some distant aunt and uncle. I considered it just to spite my father, just to show him that his control over the family wasn’t absolute. But I knew there was a strong chance I’d never see him again if I did that, and I was weak and scared, and so gave in.

There are worse ways to traverse the galaxy than by manifold. Each family is assigned a little planet orbiting a naked spacetime singularity, frozen at the moment of its explosion. I am told these are really baby universes, but I have doubts as to how that’s possible.

I had never seen my father so excited, like his purpose had been returned to him at last, forever overflowing with good cheer and performative kindness. We were off to a barely studied curio. His life finally meant something.

Our destination found its name while we were in transit, a term plucked straight from an ancient language for a festival or favourable meeting: *Ederlezi*. And soon enough we were drawing into its orbit.

From the outside it was a hole in space about one hundred miles wide. The hole itself was so thin it might as well be two-dimensional, but as our orbit slowed we caught glimpses inside and saw there was seemingly no end to its volume within.

A holographic projection from higher space? A separate universe at ninety degrees to ours? Some geometric trick we just couldn't comprehend? I decided I didn't want to know.

The manifold passed inside and landed at a little spaceport by a town, our moons all kissing gently down into the dew of the morning grass.

While the outside of Ederlezi had been incomprehensibly weird, inside it was perfectly recognisable to human senses: a large green plain with a forest stretching into the far distance. And of course a looming mountain waiting beyond that.

A small town had already been constructed, Sapiens, with all the usual amenities of colonial living, and we settled in a house just on the outskirts.

Mum was a geometer and spent most of her time examining the lip of Ederlezi, trying to discern the secret of its infinite insides. Decima enrolled at the metaphysics college in the town. And my father spent his days in ecstasy, taking little jaunts into the forest and returning with nothing but tales of blissful mysteries.

Soon the expectation fell on me to choose a life path. At the centre of Sapiens was the curiosophers' guild, a garish soapstone tower. My father took me for tours whenever he could, introduced me to his 'colleagues', made repeated jokes about how I might inherit his office one day. It was clear in which direction he wanted me to go.

I think I dawdled awhile, ignored destiny, spent mornings in the meadows and evenings at the bar.

The view was good. The air was warm. We could live a perfectly contented life and not even know we were inside a curio.

As long as no one ever, ever had the idea of setting off for the mountain.

*

Dark came over the forest. There was no sun in Ederlezi. During daytime the light didn't originate from anywhere, the sky simply grew very blue. You'd be amazed how quickly you adapt to that. (Then again, is it *so* normal to have a burning ball of hydrogen in the sky instead?)

My father and I sat by the campfire, Tommaron sleeping in my lap.

"Will be an unusual day tomorrow," he said.

"As if today wasn't odd."

"It gets weirder."

"Will we change more, on the inside I mean?"

"Yes," he said. "The further in we go, the stronger the effect."

This new empathy in me, I was almost used to it, but the alien nature of the change was still a frightening prospect. There were things in my mind that were not my mind.

Distantly I heard the burble of the river. I could wait for my father to fall asleep, then go jump in. I would arrive back in Sapiens, providing another sublimist thought to fish me out, else I'd just carry on down to whatever was at the bottom of Ederlezi. But either way the last two days would be gone, all stains expunged. I wouldn't even remember my father's visit.

I said, "Do you think these mental changes are an intentional effect?"

"You know better than I do how impossible it is to speculate about Big Sister intentions. We're like dogs trying to read literature. But I have a theory, of course."

"Mm?"

He looked pompously up to the stars and spoke as though to a large audience. "I think the curios are teaching devices of some kind. Not for us, but the Big Sisters themselves, to educate their children on higher modes of being. And I think we find ourselves now in the greatest teaching device of all, a consciousness accelerator."

"A *what*?"

"A lesson then, whatever you want to call it. But a lesson that strips away the screaming ego and the fragile self, all the primate stuff, and leaves the student with whatever's left."

And what *is* left? I thought to myself. What could *possibly* be left under everything we are? The millennia of self-interest and doubt. The light years of scheming and plotting. What were we but little want machines?

The fire burned down to spiteful embers and we went in silence to bed.

The next morning we'd just broken camp when I spotted a figure in the distance. Nearer then, it was unmistakably the old woman we'd met two nights before. She plodded towards us, engaged in a fraught conversation with herself. She glanced briefly over our faces as she passed and continued

on. My father put up pleading hands for me to stay quiet, but I was already prickling with offence. “Hello?” I said.

“Hmph,” she replied.

“It’s good to see you again. We thought you were walking back out of Ederlezi. Did you go on ahead instead?”

“Not a clue who you are, not a fig for the jam, not a…”

She continued off into the trees.

“The bloody cheek,” I said. “She stepped in the river again, didn’t she? Doesn’t remember a damn thing.”

“Or she hasn’t met us yet,” my father said, eyeing me very carefully.

“What in hells does that mean?”

“Just what I said.”

I was going to start yelling, when Tommaron whispered as a mouse into my ear, “Calm now, it’ll all become clear soon, surely.”

On into the morning then; the forest and the quiet.

Around eleven we stopped for a snack, rubbed our sore muscles, inhaled the crisp air. I had not wanted to come. And truly, I still didn’t want to be here. But we’d survived in the woods this far, and there was a certain pride attached to that.

I was about to put my pack back on when I looked down and suddenly realised how my shoes worked. To be specific: the laces.

Years ago someone had taught me the arokin knot, a Big Sister invention, and I liked using it. It never came loose and there was something impossibly complicated about its structure. Just looking at the knot itself, you could never quite keep all its parts in your mind at the same time; an acceptable microdose of sublimia.

Now it occurred to me one could just diagram the knot with a pencil and paper, come up with an easy little protocol for which loop went where, analyse it as a system.

It next occurred to me that this was not a normal thought.

I watched the fabric of my father’s shirt as he walked ahead, the intricacy of its weave. I’d never really considered how one built a machine to manufacture it, but suddenly the method was obvious: wool or whatever placed at right angles to each other, then tied about.

And there was Tommaron, clip-clopping as a bonsai horse at my father’s side. I’d idly wondered over the years how he worked, but knew it was probably beyond me. Now I had a suspicion. He’d said he was composed of

tiny universes trapped right at the moment of singularity, like the heart of a manifold. Surely in his case they were strung together the way the ancients used transistors, then superpositioners, taught to interact as little flickers of consciousness, building into something that knew itself. Gods, the audacity of technology.

I said, “I feel unusual.”

“Don’t fight it,” my father replied.

It wasn’t wisdom that increased as we walked deeper into the forest, but rather understanding. And understanding is surely the most dangerous of mental activities.

Plenty of animals on the mother planet must have been intelligent. They knew how to get what they wanted – with sharp teeth, with trickery. But that was all self-serving. One could spend a lifetime knowing that shaking the tree brings the coconut down without ever having to look into the mechanics of gravity.

Humans were different; we tried to explain systems without always needing an immediate benefit for doing so. We saw contexts. We asked questions we knew there’d likely never be answers to. And so curiosity delivered us the sharpest teeth of all: reason.

Around mid-afternoon we spied smoke through the trees, another town. This one was loud and clanking and sputtering, a mess of industry.

My father said, “Think your feet can take walking until sundown?”

“You don’t want to go see what that’s all about?” I said, meaning the new town.

He shrugged. “Probably just some magic tricks, nothing of interest. Let’s stay on the trail.”

I squinted to make a point. “All this time you’ve been throwing every distraction possible in my face, and suddenly you *don’t* want to explore?”

“I’m a little tired.”

“Then we’ll go into town and find somewhere to relax.”

“I relax better when I’m walking.”

“Are you avoiding an ex-girlfriend or something?”

“I would prefer to stay on the trail.”

I looked to Tommaron for sense. He was pretending to examine a leaf. I said, “Well I’m going in, so you can stay here on your lonesome like the sad old man you are.”

Tommaron and I set off. My father caught up a half-mile later, muttering to himself, refusing to meet our eyes.

Entering the town we passed a sign that read: *Epistemia*, only someone had scribbled that out and replaced it with: *Whatever Works.*

The town was a farce of pipes and girders, steam and pistons, as though each age of technology had smashed into themselves, no one time period quite finding superiority.

There were the expected bars and restaurants, the hikers sitting on street corners looking rather tired, but the pavements were full of oddities: dancing clockwork birds, levitating chess pieces, people vanishing into the air and reappearing in adjacent alleys, apparently delighted with the trick.

“Magicians?” I asked my father.

“Worse,” he said. “Scientists.”

Machines bubbled with plasma. Machines frothed with wine. Machines assembled pancakes made from pure folded spacetime.

I’d never had an eye for engineering, but now found if I stared at these weird contraptions long enough, I could almost work out the basics of their tricks. Something in me rather liked this new shift in perspective.

Hydraulic perpetual motion machines, a four-dimensional trapeze performance, I couldn’t deny it was a spectacle; as though someone had taken human curiosity, doused it in even more cleverness, and carelessly dropped a match.

Hungry, we stopped at a restaurant on the street and had bread and soup.

The three of us were silent, lost in racing daydreams of systems and mechanisms. Someone had considerately thought to leave pencils and paper on every table, and we gave ourselves over to frantic sketching.

When we were finished, we glanced over each other’s work.

My father presented an automated whisky still. We’d had those for millennia, of course. His twist however was a semi-conscious algorithm that could taste the contents, get drunk, and report if it produced the right kind of buzz.

I showed them what I called an *anti-sublimiser*, a device that, once fitted to the head, would keep re-uploading the wearer’s baseline mental state. If ever they started suffering from sublimia, the machine replaced it with a sensible degree of boredom, guaranteeing the wearer never lost their mind. My father only *hmm*-ed at this.

Tommaron had drawn a detailed landscape, the sun setting over some trees in the distance.

“What in hells is that?” I asked.

“Where I’d like to live.”

“We can find a field if that’s what you really want.”

“No,” he said, “it’s *my* field. Only mine.”

“What an invention,” I scoffed. “What a *revelation*.” I folded the paper up into a little airplane and threw it across the road and it disappeared down a drain. “There you go, an object lesson in what happens to our dreams.”

He nodded and stared at the table.

“Well, hey now…” my father started

“Oh, not more of the liberation crap,” I muttered. “He’s an adjunct, a *machine* – a machine who’s treated rather well, if I may say so.”

My father looked disgusted and went to reply, when an explosion sounded from a few streets distant. People went running, not away but towards it – the behaviour of a town predicated on scientific curiosity.

We couldn’t help ourselves either. We weaved through the crowd and found ourselves before a ruin.

It had been a warehouse of some kind. Now it was a charred and smoking skeleton, the roof gone, the walls exploded. Folk were standing around admiring the mess; others already picking through the remains.

They piled pipes and tubing and circuits on the floor and attempted to fit the parts back together.

“Meson lattice?” someone said.

“No,” someone else replied. “It’s a stupid vacuum engine attempt again, I bet.”

“A neutrino net maybe?”

“Hardly. The filaments are too large. A mass generator at best.”

Finally across the crowd a man shouted, “Closed timelike inductor.” I knew that voice by its tones of total self-assurance: my father. He explained, “Someone’s been trying to bend time back on itself. Look, you can see the little iridium plates. Poor thing couldn’t achieve enough proton velocity though.”

Only, my father was stood next to me in silence. Very slowly I turned to him.

Gravely he whispered into my ear, “You’ll need to keep still now. Don’t engage in any way, you understand?”

An argument had begun about alloys and particle trajectories and whatever else. I squinted through the crowd. It *was* my father over there, bedraggled but wearing the same hiking outfit. And there next to him, even more unmistakably, even more bedraggled, was myself.

Tommaron said in my mind, *Stay calm, everything will be fine, I'm sure.*

The man imitating my father held up a shining loop of metal. "Boson antagoniser. The only thing anyone would use this for is temporal stuff. Call it what you want, but it's a closed timelike inductor, I promise."

Accusations followed: nonsense, bullshit etc. I wanted to push through the crowd, ask this man who in the hells he was. I took a step and met eyes with the counterfeit version of myself. He was staring right back at me. He smiled and nodded.

I nodded.

I stepped back, speechless.

The crowd gave up on their backwards engineering soon enough. The chattering turned to muttering. The muttering then to quiet. Everyone began to disband.

The two mirror images turned about and wandered off with the rest. I went to follow after, but my father put his hand on my shoulder. "Best to let them alone."

"Parallel universe conjunction?" I tried desperately.

"Something like that."

"Gods, did you know this would happen? Is that why you didn't want us to come into town?"

"Let's not stay here tonight, really."

We hiked back out to the forest, the little eye-shaped blaze telling us we were on the trail again.

Our minds burned with ideas too large for mental containment: star drives, dark photons, electrically heated cat beds.

I looked to the trees and saw the potential to build elaborate canoes. I looked to my hands and saw how much easier everything would be with a sixth finger.

We scaled a hill and came to a clearing. A man was camped on a rocky overhang, the belching town below.

"Say!" my father shouted before I could stop him. "Mind if we join you for the evening?"

The man nodded.

We put up our yurts a polite distance from his tent and built a campfire and drank beer. The dark came on and eventually the man wandered over and wearily shook our hands and sat himself down.

My father said, “Coming down or going up?”

“Going up, I think,” the man said, staring off at Big Maybe.

“Been a long walk to get here, eh?”

“Very long, yes.”

I thought of the old woman we’d met days before. Her eyes had been full of what came next, running towards something. His were defeated and flat; running from.

“You’ve been into town?” my father asked.

“Yes, I lived there for a while.”

“Ah. Big explosion today, you heard it?”

The man’s shoulders slouched. He took a small charred mechanism from his pocket. “Heard it, yes. I caused it, actually. Just couldn’t bear another failed design. No one was hurt?”

“No, nothing like that. Sorry, but what in hells were you doing?”

He stayed silent for a time. My father offered him a beer. He drank it with laboured swigs, then said, “I heard about Whatever Works on the outside. Someone told me it’s where all the decent engineering gets done. I’ve had a problem for a long time now, one I was sure was just a question of mechanisms. Now I know it’s a question of loss.”

“You were trying to build a machine? Someone told us it had to do with timelike curves.”

The man nodded. “They were chrono-transcendent, the Big Sisters. They had ways of talking to themselves in their own past, gravity radios. Were you aware?” My father and I shook our heads. “I thought if that was possible then surely there must be a way to step *into* the past. If radio can travel back, why not blood and bone too?”

“You know that’s not possible…” I said.

“But it is!” he replied, almost manic. “Haven’t you noticed the stars changing?”

Tommaron and my father exchanged a glance. I looked up and found the constellations were even more muddled than before, barely recognisable.

“Don’t you realise what this place is?” the man cried.

“Well, let’s not speculate on what we can’t conceive of,” my father said.

“Please go on,” I said.

“We’re walking into the future, I’m sure of it,” the man explained.

“That seems a little fanciful.”

“Ederlezi has multiple entrances in time, you know. People are entering from all over history. Hells, when are you from?”

“Oh, let’s not get into specifics,” my father said.

“The Year of Radical Fun,” I said.

The man said, “I don’t even know that era! It must be ahead of the present I was born in. So you see, the Big Sisters *did* work out how to move across history. This whole curio is a bridge into the deep future.”

I looked over to Tommaron for reassurance that this man was insane. Tommaron sank onto his belly and feigned sleeping.

I said, “But why were you trying so hard to build a machine capable of reaching the past if that’s what Ederlezi does anyway? Couldn’t you just hike the other way, walk back into history?”

His tone softened. “Because I can’t find an exit into the era I’d rather live in. The Big Sisters were clever, didn’t want us popping out into their time, I suppose. Try to leave before the point you came in and Ederlezi simply won’t let you. I’ve been as far back as I can, past Sapiens, past the towns before that, all fruitless.” He splayed his hands, offering his soul. “I’m a historian. All my life I’ve lived in the past. It didn’t seem such a stretch to try building a machine to visit that country, to correct a few mistakes.”

Perhaps still affected by Lucent Reach and its disgusting empathy effect, I said, “Did you lose someone?”

“Five thousand years before I was even born,” he said. “And now it’s like losing her all over again.”

He threw the little mechanism on the campfire. It spat angrily a moment then died down.

“What will you do now?” my father asked.

He nodded to Big Maybe. “If not back, then forward. Because standing still will only kill us. Or, I certainly shouldn’t like to die stationary.”

He got a little tipsy and told us of the object of his affections, some scientist he’d never even met. My father and I made non-committal approving noises the way you do for someone in pain when they deliver their life story. Then he seemed to accept the finality of it all, and we made small talk beneath the strange stars.

The lovesick often behave like those suffering with sublimia. Just as with confronting too much Big Sister technology, love operates under its own logic, repels any attempt to explain its workings, and is too wide and boundless to fold completely into yourself. One either goes mad from it all, or simply accepts that it's forever beyond worldly explanation.

I had no intention of disabusing this man of his affliction. In pain as he was, the pain itself was the last link to what he'd lost, and so he clung to it for life.

We drank until there was nothing left to drink and went to bed when we got tired.

I said softly through the canvas of my yurt, "Is he right about the stars changing, about time?"

There was a long pause and my father said, "Yes."

"Did you know that all along?"

He didn't reply.

*

I don't quite remember how my family left. Fragments are still there. My father must've worked on my mother with the same intensity he used to get us all the way to Ederlezi in the first place, that much is certain. One morning we got chatting about it all, the four of us, and my father suggested we move further into the forest, and to my surprise my mother didn't disagree. I remember staring at her wide-eyed, the pillar of the family so easily broken. She wouldn't meet my gaze. Decima was my last hope. She avoided my eyes too.

"What in hells do you think you'll find in the forest?" I asked them.

My father appointed himself as their mouthpiece and said, "Everything our species has been after for a million years now."

That was that, the place all to myself. I resented the three of them of course, and the resentment soon turned to hatred. They had abandoned me to this house, to this town, to living inside this awful, inexplicable, and dead monument. I hated my father the most. He had orchestrated it all.

Every day I sat out on the porch in Sapiens and drank, and every day I waited with dread for the sound of their screams as they came back down on the river, spat out by whatever monster it was that the hikers and climbers met as they moved closer to Big Maybe.

Oh, technological communication between towns was impossible in Ederlezi, everyone knew that of course, but couldn't one of them hike back down even for a day? Was I so discardable?

We tell a collective story that one can outwait tragedy. It's a staring contest, and as long as you don't blink and give into despair, eventually you'll wake up one morning with all the hurt forgotten. But no adult actually believes this. Rather, you simply get used to the hurt – it becomes as white noise, ever-present but something one can occasionally find distraction from, with hedonism, with other hurts.

I drank for a while in the bar. It was full of curiosophers so broken they had shut up entirely, and that suited me fine.

I spent a few weeks in the park reading the literature of old, but the voices were all stale and dead, and besides, what could those writers have known of what I was living through?

Finally I wandered over to the Sublimists' College. I'd heard the entry rate was very small and so didn't fancy my chances much. Soon I saw why almost nobody was accepted. The interview consisted of only one question: Have you already, or do you one day intend to climb Big Maybe?

I said no. I was immediately offered a place.

Months later when it was my turn to conduct interviews, I understood. Almost every hopeful candidate was a *splat* – a curiosopher who'd arrived back in Sapiens via the river, too traumatised to try the trail again, yet too attached to what the mountain promised to ever consider leaving Ederlezi for good. They hoped training in sublimism would help, as perhaps a reformed arsonist might enlist as a firefighter.

These sorts could not be trusted. They would use each sublimia patient as nothing but a window into the truth of Big Maybe, questioning them of their experiences, trying to claw back just a little piece of the absolute that they themselves had forgotten.

Not only would I never climb Big Maybe, but I hated it down to the depths of my being – it'd taken my family after all. I was qualified in this regard.

I had a profession and a purpose, even if that purpose was to relieve others of their false purposes.

Well Dad, who was little and discardable now?

*

I woke to the sound of the sad man breaking camp. I watched him through the yurt's canvas methodically putting everything back in his pack. I knew it felt good to focus on simple protocols when one is in pain; to tie shoelaces and dust shelves, to brush one's teeth and water the plants, if only to feel little successes when everything else has exploded.

When he was gone, I got up and milled about a bit. There was the charred mechanism in the firepit still, a black husk.

To step back into time. It was fatuous. It was inane. Not to mention that if one intended to do it, they would know it was possible *because they would have already done it.* Perhaps he felt his sadness took precedence over the laws of physics.

What is it like, I thought, to experience hurt not as a little disaster one gets over in a few months, but simply happens to you and never stops? There must be some point at which you realise the scope of the game – there must be a day when you wake up hoping to be better and just accept that the betterness isn't here, and won't be visiting tomorrow or the next decade either. Surely this is how the universe makes artists.

My father got up and made coffee. "He was another historical one. How lucky we're getting with company," he mumbled.

"Did he come in at a different era to us, really?"

"I'd say so, yes. Else his skin is looking great for a man of at least a few thousand. He was from around the thirtieth restoration, I think."

"Then Sapiens isn't the only doorway into Ederlezi?"

He pointed out beyond the cliff to *Whatever Works*, still billowing smoke to itself, then out beyond that too. I spied a patch of sky slightly darker than the rest and a tiny black fleck that must've been a spacecraft.

"My gods," I said. "Is that *another* entrance? What in hells is outside?"

"Oh, some millennium after ours I suppose."

"If that's our future, aren't you a little curious to see what's out there?"

He said, "If our friend was right, we couldn't leave through it anyway. Besides, nothing, *nothing*, however technologically advanced and scientifically brilliant in the great future of our species could even come close to what we'll find at the top of Big Maybe."

"Then I think you should prepare us for it a little at least."

"Ah, then you're coming up with me?"

"Oh gods, I didn't say that."

“But you did,” he murmured and whistled some ridiculous tune to himself.

We set off walking and found ourselves mostly on the lips of little hills, emerging from and re-entering the oppressive trees. Then there was the mountain not so far ahead, of course – Big Maybe and its now almost blinding mist at the peak.

“Can we make it all the way up tonight?” Tommaron asked.

“Not a great idea,” my father said. “We’ll pass one more town first. Best we stock up on supplies. The climb won’t be easy.”

We didn’t joke; barely talked at all. We walked as soldiers off to battle, brooding, incurious.

The landscape began to change in a way that felt familiar, the unfamiliarity of it at least.

I looked down and the dirt seemed to have scattered itself on the ground in organised topologies.

Tommaron… I said mentally.

No, I feel it too, he replied.

My father had stopped ahead, drawing shapes on the floor with a stick.

“And what is that?” I asked.

“Rinian fifth-dimensional calculus,” he said.

“I didn’t know you were a mathematician.”

“We all will be shortly,” he replied, a little too darkly.

As we continued, the effect only grew stronger. In the tree canopy above I saw fractals and vortices; endlessly rearranging alignments of geometry in a fashion I was sure must’ve been there before, but I only now had the eyes to notice.

I bent to pick a flower and saw its stem was disappearing into the air, as though it were growing out of pure abstraction. It wasn’t just beautiful, but *exactly* beautiful, its form and ratios somehow in complete agreement with the order of things.

“What’s happening?” I said to my father.

“We’re very close now. The veils are peeling away.”

“The veils of what?”

“Appearance, I suppose.”

As we neared the base of Big Maybe we saw clouds settled on the tree line. They bunched in groups, each one larger than its brother. Without even

having to check, I knew the ratio of increase would be true to the Fibonacci sequence.

So too we examined pitcher plants and bird beaks and saw spirals that dove into themselves. I suspected if we had a microscope, they would continue on forever, down into everywhen.

We stopped for lunch in a clearing and ate lentil soup. I was idly chewing bread when I noticed a blue bracelet hanging from a tree. Closer then, I saw it was identical to the one I wore on my wrist.

I held them both up to my father with more than a little despair. “Are there timelines alongside ours?” I said. “Is that what we’re seeing?”

“Would it make you happier if it was?”

Panic began to rise in me again, the sense that we were wading into things we could simply never understand. “Oh gods, just tell me.”

He pulled some soup from his beard and said, “Nothing is magic, not even magic itself. Isn’t that your credo?”

I meant to reply with something cutting, but instead just heard a guttural yell of pure rage come out of my throat and die off in a whine of ignorance.

He put his hands up in surrender. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry…” he said. “It’ll all make sense soon, I promise.”

That was the afternoon of the oblong, the dodecahedron. That was the humid walk in which we looked to our hands and saw them full of tiny triangles, and tiny spheres within those triangles.

All matter, all phenomena, I knew then, were simply appearances of the First Forms; the prime abstractions living at the base of existence, beyond clocks and tape measures. Geometry, logic, and what must be; the rules that had been there at the beginning of the universe, before even, and would well outlive its end.

Had those laws been fabricated, or were they simply *the only way things could be*? Was everything necessary?

Completely by intuition, the way one knows black is colour’s absence and all things wish to fall to the floor, I realised how to calculate the stars’ shifted positions from the night before. And their new arrangements must mean we were seeing a sky viewed from one hundred million years in our own future.

“Hey—” I started at Tommaron.

“You’re right,” he murmured, having been watching my thoughts all this time, I suppose. “I can’t explain it, but you’re exactly right.”

I said lowly and to no one, “We’re walking to the end of everything.”

My father strained back, “Was it ever not so?”

We neared the final town. There was no bright welcome sign, but we stepped over a display of broken pottery arranged into the name *Asymptote:* a line forever approaching but never reaching infinity. How pretentious.

The town was a geometer’s paradise; jagged temples disappearing beneath the ground, towering spindles that appeared incapable of supporting themselves and yet managed to. Bedrolls and junk were everywhere on the floor. It seemed many of these people lived outside, the buildings were mere decoration.

As we passed through the centre, we saw hikers babbling to themselves, drawing formulae in the dirt with sticks and glass shards. Others were arguing in abstruse terms none of us could understand about coefficients and necessary contingents.

We treated ourselves to beds at an inn. No payment was required, the receptionist’s eyes as vacant as ours, his mind on more conceptual things.

We shuffled upstairs and collapsed on our beds in a shared room, all of us struggling to maintain the mental wherewithal it took just to move our limbs.

There was no technology here, I realised. All the gadgets and amenities of the Symposium were forgotten. The most complicated machines I’d seen around the town were hinges and latches, and even those looked handmade and often on the edge of coming apart.

We napped for a few hours, then showered and went looking for food.

There were no restaurants or shops here. Instead, everyone seemed to subsist on plants and nuts that grew from bushes that jutted right out of – what? The realm of pure abstraction? – like that little perfect flower I’d seen in the forest.

Those who ate did it without expression, like cows chewing cud, ingesting just enough to survive, laying back down in the dirt to stare at nothing.

Tommaron brought us a few nuts he’d scavenged. We practically inhaled them, then found ourselves on the ground just like the others.

There was only the shrill wind and the cold and the flapping of theorem-covered parchment flying past.

“We mustn’t lose ourselves,” my father muttered.

“Mm,” I replied.

“Remember your name. Remember my name.”

I was furious for a moment – was he trying to instruct a *sublimist* against sublimia? Just the idea of it… But soon the thought was swallowed by another, and another: Where do *ideas* come from in the first place?

We generate them of course. But what about the concepts they sit atop? – geometry and number theory and the shape of all possibles.

And: would two parallel lines ever truly meet?

In a flat space I knew they wouldn’t. But on a sphere for example…

And: what if I took the world and divided it into sets? Say, living forms and non-living forms. I could contain all that in a larger set called ‘things’. But what about forms that had never existed? – metal dragons and cold fire and so on. Could a single set ever contain itself? And if it could, what would *that* set be contained in?

We fell into eternity’s lap, our minds full of paradoxes, our bodies trembling in wonder. Now and then we cried out. So too was the town a random chorus of moans and revelations.

Then one moan suddenly rang louder than the rest; a wail of deep injustice. The three of us roused and looked about. My father said, “Whatever we see, I’m right here. When you know it won’t kill you, nothing can ever hurt so badly you can’t recover. Do you understand?”

We followed the wail on stumbling legs, more folk joining, all of us dopey as woken dreamers.

When I saw the scene, I was too dazed even to understand it.

It was myself, my mirror image once again. He was cradling my father’s limp body in his arms.

He cried out over and over: “Oh gods, he just collapsed.”

A few folk bent to take my father’s pulse and only whispered something soothing and final and stepped back. Others came forward to offer hands of comfort.

As before, instinctively I rushed forward. My father, my version at least, put a firm hand on my shoulder and said, “I cannot tell you what a terrible idea that is. Let him sort this thing out himself.”

On the floor, in his lap, in *my* lap, my father’s eyes were closed and his mouth was agape and his arms were hanging like dead vines.

I watched myself sob for quite some time until he seemed so empty that even grief left him. He wiped his eyes, smoothed his shirt, turned directly to me and said, “Be kind to him.”

It snowed as we climbed. The slope was inclining more and more steeply. We took out our picks and put crampons over our boots and fell into a silent brotherhood of trudging and grunting.

Now and then I looked back down to the forest to see how far we'd come, the emerald and cyan of it all, stretching into nothing. Then I drove my pick back into the ground and tried to convince myself to take another step.

The wind battered at our ears, rendered the tips of our noses and fingertips numb. The cold seeped into our shoes and kissed our toes. From time to time I thought I spied the peak through the snow, but knew not to get my hopes up. This place obeyed no laws. If Ederlezi had taught us anything, it was that it hadn't taught us anything.

"Not far," my father kept shouting. "Not far now."

"And when we get there?" I yelled back.

"Everything will be fine."

I threw down my pick and waited until he turned about to check on me. He opened his palms to say: *What?*

"You know too much."

"We must keep going," he insisted.

"You know too much about all of this. Tell me what we just saw."

"I will, I promise."

"No," I shouted, hard enough I felt my vocal cords grating. "You just died in front of me. Tell us what in hells is going on. Is it a shared hallucination?"

"No."

"Other worlds then? Are we seeing universes next to ours?"

"If you will just keep walking…"

"Fuck!" I screamed. "Fuck you and fuck all of it! I'm not a child anymore. I don't have to submit to this nonsense."

He paused in thought a moment, then trudged over to me. Watching him emerge from the snowstorm into a whole person, it looked like he was being born out of the wind.

He said into my ear, "I promise you on my life and yours that this will all be worth it in ways you simply cannot understand right now. I promise I wouldn't put you through this if it wasn't leading towards the greatest

revelation of all our lives. I promise I love you and that a way will open. Do you trust me on that?"

"No."

"Then trust me," Tommaron said, perched on my shoulder as a little hedgehog. "Because I have never lied to you and never would."

I was too cold and exhausted to fight. We pushed on into the horrible unknown.

Above us now I caught snatches of the dancing white mist at the peak. Sublimia came in screaming waves with the wind. I did like my tutors had told me and watched the terror as closely as I could, and allowed it to leave through the back door of my mind without offering it tea.

So too with the cold – I tried my best only to notice the sensation of freezing rather than associating with the feels themselves, but how can we ever resist embracing pain when it speaks to us in our own language?

We reached the edge of the peak at nightfall without any celebration. The snowstorm had died and the sky was clear. I was just glad to rest.

The shining mist turned our skin star white. I did my best not to look directly inside. I had thought there would be noise or violence. Close now, the mist only blazed in silence, assured in its supreme weirdness, evidently with nothing to prove.

My father boiled water for tea and we looked down on the world.

Among the trees I saw trickles of smoke here and there, hints of the towns we'd come through. And above all that I counted just two, perhaps three stars.

I said, "Where are the constellations?"

"Dead…" Tommaron said quietly.

"What killed them?"

"Time," my father said. "Relentless plodding time."

"It hasn't killed *that,*" I said, nodding to the mist.

"No, because that's what comes after."

"After the end of everything?"

"More accurately back to the beginning, perhaps."

"Oh gods," I moaned. Riddles in riddles. I turned around to Tommaron and my father and caught them both staring at me.

"The moment has arrived," my father said. "Go to him."

To who? – I reflexively went to ask. We had been walking so long I'd almost forgotten the point of all this. "Where is he?"

"You'll know," Tommaron said.

Now they were both sages. Now I was a little boy again.

"Is there anything else I should know?"

"Yes," my father said. "That only a fool longs for certainty."

I climbed up to the peak. It wasn't very wide, maybe a hundred feet across. I saw no one, heard nothing. I called out that I was here to help. No reply.

Just for a moment I found the courage to look directly into the mist. It rippled and did not ripple. It was all colours and no colours. And there in its glare I saw the outline of a figure sitting hunched in the snow.

"Hello?" I said.

The figure didn't move.

I dawdled closer. "I've come to…" What? Rescue you? If anything, I was the one who needed rescuing.

"Yes, I know," he said.

He was sat on a snowy rock with his face in his hands. His hair was long and tangled, perhaps after months in the forest. And the backpack at his side, it was identical to mine.

So too I knew the scar on his forehead, and the speckles of grey in his hair, and the slight crookedness of his fingers.

"Don't lose your mind," he mumbled from behind his hands. "You will anyway, but try not to."

"I..." I said and finished the sentence there.

"I, yes," he agreed, his voice right on the edge of breaking. He drew his hands away and it was indeed my face, though dirtier and with a beard. He carried the embers that now lived in my eyes of all the bizarre changes of walking in the forest, though his seemed to have risen into little fires.

We stared at each other for aeons, then I said, "I've come to take you home."

"There's nothing for me back that way."

I nodded through the mist to the other side of the mountain. "Then maybe…"

He strained out, "And go without him? And go *without him*?"

"Who?" I said.

"Who do you think?"

“Gods, was that you back there, in Asymptote?”

“Months ago for me, but yes.”

“Our father really died?”

My doppelganger nodded.

“These aren’t universes next door,” I said.

“No.”

“You’re just me ahead in time, aren’t you?”

“It seems so.”

I watched my mind to see if it might implode, but it just kept humming along. The worst and strangest thing had happened. Yet I was still alive.

“What should I do for you?” I asked.

He shook his head. It was disturbing to see one’s own mannerisms from the outside. He gave off all the markers of total self-involvement. For just a moment he stuttered out a sob and caught it in time. I couldn’t even cry in front of myself.

I sat down beside him and looked up at the few remaining stars. I said, “How far forward are we now?”

“One hundred billion years, right at the end.”

“And you still didn’t find time to shave?”

“Oh, don’t do the sublimist shtick on me,” he said. “Neither of us have a sense of humour anyway.”

“Well, what did you say when you were back in my position, when you were me?”

He met my eyes, truly disgusted. “Really? Want me to tie your shoelaces for you as well?”

“No, sorry, I just mean—”

He said, “I’m well aware what you mean. Gods, I know everything you’re going to say. It felt so profound when it was my turn. But you have no idea, do you? Even now you think you know what’s coming, but you don’t.”

There was a desperation to him, but I didn’t see any of the obvious signs of sublimia, no tremors or psychosis. I was conducting a conversation with myself – it was far more likely I was the one at risk of mental collapse.

I poured some tea from my flask and we passed the cup back and forth awhile.

It suddenly occurred to me he was the only person in this whole cursed world who would be completely honest. As though reading my mind he

said, “Division by zero. That’s the closest to an answer I can give.”

“I’m not even sure what the question was going to be.”

“Think one up.”

I said, “Oh, I don’t know. What’s everything heading towards?”

“Well, there you are.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t want to,” he said.

“I really think it’s best I hear it.”

“Better to see it.” He nodded to the mist.

Terrified, I stood and squinted in. It burned at first, searing white opalescence, but my eyes began to adapt.

Clearly on the other side was a shining counterpart of our peak. Then the mountain fell away back to the land, only not into valleys and little smog-dappled towns, but forms; pure forms, recurring and reiterating, one great dance of notions and whimsy, the foundation of the world playing hide and seek with itself.

I turned away, cried out, “What in hells is that?”

“The return,” he said. “The coming home to all that existed before creation.”

“What could’ve existed *before* creation?”

“Everything necessary.”

I looked to my hands. They were spades now, cumbersome lumps of imperfect matter. So too with the ground, just angular chaos there to keep things up. And so too with everything, I realised. The world was a child’s imitation of what really waited beneath us: the realm of ideal appearances, things in themselves as they are.

He said, “You’ve felt it beginning already. The closer you got to the mountain, the more things began to fall away. First the barriers to the heart, then the ignorance of mechanisms, and finally a confrontation with the fundamental axioms of reality. A little taster of what’s coming. I think the trail is a test, to see if you really want to live in a land of pure empathy and pure technology and pure postulates.”

Something worldly reasserted itself inside me. Hadn’t I hiked all this way for him? I said, “You don’t have to go through there, you know. You can come back down with us, step away from it all.”

“I really can’t. But I’m not sure I can walk over the peak either.”

“Why?”

“His body’s down there,” he said gesturing to the base of our side of the mountain. “Couldn’t even give him a proper burial. Can’t just leave without him…”

“I see.”

“He said he was tired and that was it. Gone. *Gone*.”

He sat there staring at the floor, a model of inaction, the universe dying around us and all he could do was mope. I tried some tough sublimist love: “The dead don’t improve, you know that, don’t you?”

“What?”

“Nothing’s going to change if you just sit here blubbering. You said he died months ago. What have you been doing all this time – pissing about and feeling sorry for yourself? Making sure everyone knows how tough things are for you, while they suffer in silence with lives harder than you can even imagine?”

He growled, “You pig-headed, narcissist prick.”

“Okay,” I said.

“You have no idea. You have *absolutely* no idea. You’ve made a life of lecturing everyone else on their hurts just so you don’t have to enact the most minimal labour to actually get to the bottom of your own tiny issues.”

“All right.”

“And here you are belittling *me* of all people just so you don’t have to look to where the real sublimia waits.”

“And where’s that?” I said.

“Inside, you feckless halfwit.”

“You seem upset.”

He considered that for a moment, then he hit me quite hard on the temple. We both stared back at each other in surprise; speechless in the burning light.

I hit him in the mouth and he cried out. He came at me reaching for my throat. I tried my best to keep him off until we were rolling around in the snow, him snarling into my ear, me striking him again and again in the ribs. Finally he was on top of me, wringing my neck, his spit in my eyes, the two of us barking and screaming like animals, and *fuck you*, and *fuck you*, and *go to the hells* and *fuck you*.

I let go of his wrists, gave myself over completely, him tightening his grip on my neck. We stared at each other with wild eyes, him looking even more scared than I felt.

He got off of me and collapsed into sobs. I held him as tightly as I could.

“It was so horrible,” he said.

“I know.”

“It will be so horrible for you.”

“I know.”

He cried some more until it seemed like he didn’t have any tears left and I said, “But it’s happened now. The worst has happened now. And you’re still here.”

“Barely.”

“I mean, I think it’s what we were always afraid of, no? That he’d jaunt off to some awful curio and just never come back. It’s the first proper fear I remember.”

“And now look where we are,” he said.

The mist pulsated a little, ourselves on the reasonable side of things – all of gods knew what on the other.

I said, “Do you want to come down with me?”

“No thank you.”

“But you know you can’t stay here.”

“Of course.”

“Then tell me what I can do for you.”

He said, “Forgive him. That’s a favour I would appreciate. He’s just a child grown tall, like everyone.” Staring into the threshold with a calm I was jealous of, he added, “Mum and Decima went across years ago.”

“What? In there?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“There’s a lot you don’t remember,” he said. “They’re waiting for me on the other side. And I suppose I was waiting for you.”

“Why?”

He pointed into the valley, into the forest, all the way back to Sapiens and said, “To make sure you don’t get stuck down there.”

He reached for me and delivered the longest, kindest hug I have ever experienced. Finally we patted each other’s backs so as to pretend we weren’t actually hugging, and drew away.

“All right.” He wiped his eyes, straightened his shirt. “All right,” he said again with sudden self-assuredness. It was an act, I could see that much, but he was willing to try and believe the act – and what else is bravery anyway?

I said, “You’re ugly as hells, you know.”

“Have you taken a look at yourself?”

“In fact I have, and all of a sudden I’m not quite so afraid of my future.”

We walked a little further into the mist. The other side of Big Maybe fell away in front of us, only not into trees and rocks, but the impossible top and bottom of the world. I had to turn away, terrible fear building in me. He didn’t turn away though, looking off into it all with the kind of eyes one cultivates upon realising that a new life isn’t death.

I said, “We’ll carry him. We’ll carry his memory with us into everything. He’d like that, being right at the forefront of our heads, fucking up our days even from beyond the grave.”

“I think that’s a fine idea.”

I said, “If you meet a Big Sister—”

“I’ll say hello from you.”

“And Mum and Decima.”

“I’ll send them your best.”

“Thanks.”

He gave a little shrug, said, “Well, see you when you get here.”

He started off walking down the other side of the mountain, into pure sublimia or pure radical fun, I wasn’t sure, but clearly he was beyond caring which.

What is clinging, really? – I wondered. Nothing but an aversion to change via the insane belief that everything new will hurt. And what is letting go, really? Nothing but faith in one’s own ability to survive all tragedies and weirdnesses, knowing that pain is coming anyway, but bliss will be waiting ahead too.

The only requirement to brave the future was to promise oneself never to be broken by it. And when inevitably one was broken by it, to promise to remember that recovery was always possible.

I retraced my steps down the peak. Tommaron and my father were still there in the snow, passing a bottle of fancy wine back and forth.

“Where in bloody hells did you get that?” I asked.

“We were saving it for a special occasion,” Tommaron said, offering the bottle.

For a moment I wanted to explode – this conspiracy between them going deeper than I had ever known. Instead I sat down and took the bottle and

said, “Did you both know what was about to happen?”

“Of course,” Tommaron said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because then you wouldn’t have done it.”

I looked to my father. He wore a smile with all the goodness of the world trapped inside it and gave a single tired nod.

Tommaron took up his cat form and crawled onto my legs. I rubbed his ear and admired his whiskers. I said to him, “I let you go.”

“Mm?”

“I’ve been a bastard to you for years, telling myself we were friends when really this is nothing but slavery.” Mentally I relinquished all my control privileges and gave him full ownership of his mind. “I was a little child pulling the wings off a very clever fly. I’m so sorry.” He stared back uncertainly, perhaps wondering if this was a trick. I said, “You can go your own way if you want. Or you can stay, of course.”

He cocked his head. “What if I stay for a while?”

“Then that’s your choice and I will be very happy to have you. We’ll go find you a field with a sunset and you can call it all yours.”

He turned upside down in my lap so his feet dangled in the air like antennae, and fell perfectly asleep.

I said to my father, “He told me Mum and Decima went over the mountain already.”

“They did.”

“Then why are you and I still here on this side?”

“Because we were supposed to all go in together. That was what we decided, as a family. Then when we got up here you panicked at the last minute, convinced you would die. I told them we’d catch up and dropped you in the river to calm you down. It took you all the way back to Sapiens. By the time I hiked home, you’d forgotten the whole thing and enrolled as a sublimist, stuck in your misgivings about the infinite. I’ve been trying to convince you otherwise ever since.”

I said, “This isn’t the first time you’ve taken me up here.”

“No.”

“This isn’t even the first ten times you’ve taken me up here.”

“No.”

“How many?”

“It’s been decades.”

“Why in hells don’t I remember?”

“You’re always too spooked and insist on getting back in the river.”

For the first time now I saw not just age in his face, but weariness. The endless commitment to a cause one had no guarantee of achieving, but was not willing to let go of.

“All this time?” I said, trying not to cry. “You’ve been coming back to get me all this time?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a stubborn moron and you get it from me. Because you’re my son and I won’t let you go.”

I lay down in the snow. He did the same beside me. Only a single star was left above now.

I said, “This is the end of spacetime?”

“No, just *our* spacetime. Over the peak is the next kind.”

“Don’t you want to go in? What about the Big Sisters? Wasn’t this your life’s work?”

“Fatherhood is my new life’s work. It should always have been so.”

“Well, that means a lot to hear.” I left a long pause for him. He didn’t take it. “Isn’t there something else you say now?”

“I don’t think so.”

“A very small, very old word signifying the speaker’s desire to apologise.”

He said, “My Ubiq isn’t what it used to be.”

“Oh gods…”

“I’m sorry,” he said, all the silly play gone from his voice. “I could tell you I tried my best as a father, but I didn’t. I was all obsessed with legacy. I thought meaning something would make all the nasties go away.”

“You do mean something. You mean everything to me, really.”

“Well. Likewise.”

Tommaron’s paws trotted in the air, deep in a dream. I said, “What will it be like over the peak, do you think?”

“Maybe it won’t be so different to now, just a little closer to the truth of things.”

“I’m not ready for that.”

“You won’t be for a while,” he said. “That’s okay. I’ll stay with you until you are.”

“How is anyone *ever* ready for it? For letting go of everything they knew.”

He took a patch off his jacket, the one all the curiosophers wore – “*Astonishment or Death!*” – and stuck it to my backpack. He said, “Curios are easy. It’s daily life that should really be sending us mad. We spend decades inside robotic meat bodies, conjuring thoughts from nowhere, all of it predicated on physical laws we’ll never know the origin of. And somehow we still remember to make our beds and brush our teeth and get lost in the nonsense dramas and bickering that will seem like wasted time just a few weeks later.” He turned to the peak, to the waiting world beyond we both knew he’d never see. Perhaps talking directly to it, he said, “It’s better to confront the strangeness of being, however painful. Either we spend a lifetime accepting our bizarre situation as sentient mud, else we die – we die inside, from boredom, from a refusal to engage with the unbelievability of things for fear we’ll never recover. But we can live without ever understanding what we’re here for, you know. We can live just for the sake of it, dance just for the sake of it.”

I said, “My dad.”

“My son.”

Then completely beyond my control, my mouth added, “I can’t lose you.”

“But you will. And you’ll be so sad for a while, as you should be. Then later things will be better. You’ll think of all the times we talked nonsense and hung out and I’ll become one of your favourite stories. As far as I’m concerned, that’ll mean my dad-work is done.”

We finished the wine and watched the night and stroked Tommaron. I said, “I won’t take the river down this time. I don’t want to forget.”

“That’s good.”

“I don’t think I want to forget anything from now on.”

He nodded. “An excellent idea.”

“What will happen next?”

“Oh, I’ll live with you for a while in the old house if you’ll have me. Then we’ll try coming up here again when you’re ready.”

“What if I’m not next time either?”

“Then it will have been a good hike, and we’ll go down again and come up again, and go down again and come up again until you are. Your mother

and sister are waiting for you, and all the new truths too. Now come on, my arse is cold."

Tommaron climbed onto my shoulder as a little mouse now. We stood and looked back down into the valley, into our valley, the frantic trials of humanity where things still made sense if only for being familiar.

I saw into my bones and my heart and found two new truths waiting there: that people are flawed, and that some things will always be beyond understanding. And I knew that if we could all live with those horrors, then the rest of life would be ours since no disaster could ever come by surprise, and no revelation could ever disappoint us with its failure to materialise. It would always be now, and we would always be lost, exactly where we should be: in the dirty broken perfect of the mystery of the world.

My father would try again, my father would fail again; confronting the awful reality of my stubbornness and looking directly into it, as though staring at the sun, knowing even if it blinded, it could never really kill.

This was the chorus of adventure, this was the mantra of loss. We had always been tumbling together in the unknown. But now we knew the game, and now we would tumble in style, befriending the abyss with one great triumphant shout of: Oh well, fuck it all, I love you.

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